



Part
2

KOKORO CONNECT

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Sadanatsu Anda



Part
2

KOKORO CONNECT

A S U — RANDOM

Sadanatsu Anda

12-11-1911

KOKORO CONNECT

SADANATSU ANDA illustration SHIROMIZAKANA



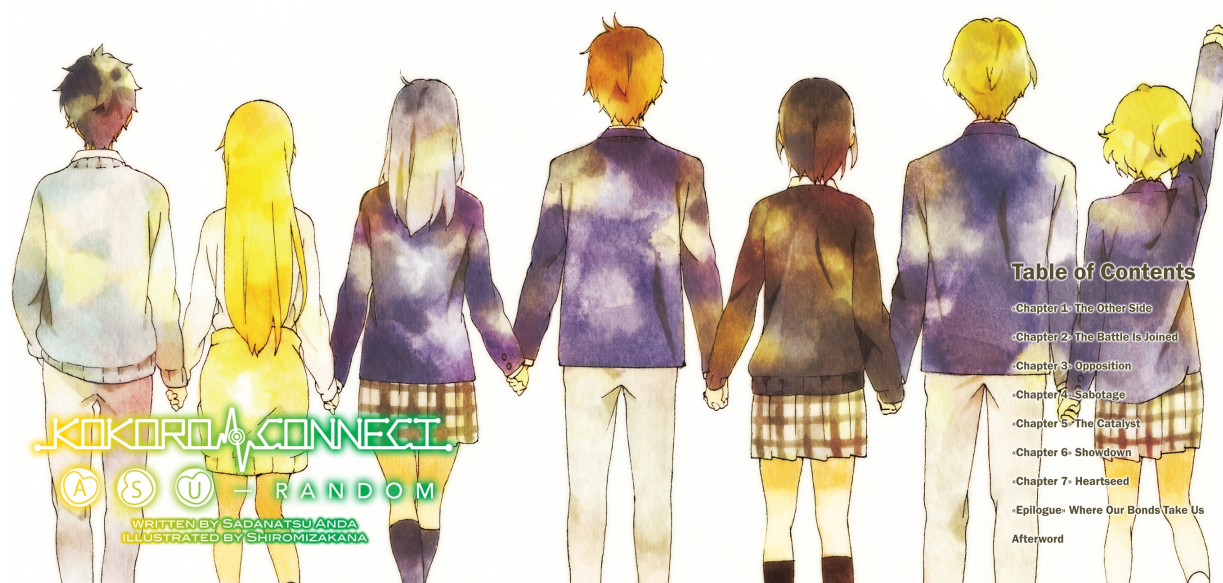


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«SENTIMENT
TRANSMISSION»

«GIVING
ORDERS»

«ROLE
SWITCHING»

«-IN THIS WORLD, EVERYONE IS EXPERIENCING A PHENOMENON-»

«INVISIBILITY»

«FLUCTUATING
FEELINGS»

«TELLING
LIES»

KOKOROCONNECT CHARACTERS



Inaba Himeko

Vice president of the Cultural Research Club, but basically runs everything. Her more feminine side is reserved for her boyfriend Taichi.



Nagase Iori

President of the Cultural Research Club. Considered the prettiest girl in school, but she doesn't let it go to her head, so she has a lot of friends. Lives alone with her mother.



Yaegashi Taichi

Cultural Research Club member. Hardworking and honest to a fault with the tendency to make sacrifices for others. Loves pro wrestling and his little sister.



Enjouji Shino

Cultural Research Club member. Small and cute like a woodland creature, but can make vicious comments without meaning to. Loves Taichi's voice.



Aoki Yoshifumi

Cultural Research Club member. His motto: "Anything goes as long as it's fun!" Resident joker of the club. In a relationship with Yui.



Kiriya Yui

Cultural Research Club member. Obsessed with all things cute and girly. Until recently, she was hailed as a child prodigy of full contact karate.



Gotou Ryuzen

Supervisor and original founder of the Cultural Research Club. His down-to-earth personality wins points with the students, who call him "Gossan."



Fujishima Maiko

Member of the Student Council Outreach Committee. Shares a class with Taichi. During their first year, she was their charismatic class president.



Uwa Chihiro

Cultural Research Club member. Shares a class with Shino and attends the same karate dojo as Yui. Has an aloof personality, but has mellowed out somewhat since joining the CRC.



Oosawa Misaki

An androgynous girl on the track team. She once confessed her love to Yui, but remains good friends with her.



Kurihara Yukina

A stylish girl on the track team. Shares a class with Taichi and is best friends with Yui. Loves to harp on and on about romance.



Katori Jouji

Student council president in charge of both the student council and the outreach committee. Smart and athletic.



Ishikawa Daiki

A baseball player in Taichi's class. In a relationship with Nakayama, but is something of a late bloomer when it comes to romance.



Nakayama Mariko

A Calligraphy Club member known for her trademark high pigtails. Best friends with Iori. Cheerful, friendly, and rowdy.



Watase Shingo

A handsome jock on the soccer team. Best friends with Taichi, with whom he shares a class. Has feelings for Fujishima.



Sone Takuya

A Manga Club member in Taichi's class. Chubby with a good-natured personality.



Shiroyama Shouto

A jazz band member nicknamed "Little Prince" due to his kindhearted nature. In a relationship with Setouchi.



Setouchi Kaoru

Used to be a bad girl, but now she's the president of Taichi's class.

Shimono Kazuhiro

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. Generally acts like a slacker.

Tada Satoshi

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. Despite his playboy aesthetic, he cares more than he lets on.

Higashino Michiko

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. Friendly with both guys and girls.

Oku Tomomi

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. Close friends with Shino in particular.



Kimura Ittetsu

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. A tennis club member oblivious to social etiquette. Worships Taichi like a god.



Miyagami Keisuke

A Photography Club member in Taichi's class. Always chasing the latest trends in hopes of getting a girlfriend.

This is not the real world.
This is an isolated space.
And yet, it's functionally no different.
This is not the real world—but it's still a world in its own
right.

Chapter 1: The Other Side

The first thing he felt was intense disgust. Everything felt off in a deeply unpleasant way—as though his whole body was melted into a viscous liquid and then flushed down the drain.

His mind was fuzzy, and he couldn't think straight. It was dark, and cold, and his eyes wouldn't focus.

Where am I?

He could feel something hard and immovable, uneven and gritty, pressed against his hands, his arms, his legs, his cheek. It was the ground.

I'm lying on the ground?

Suddenly, the fog cleared from his mind. Using both hands, he pushed himself up onto his knees, then sprang to his feet.

Next he squeezed his eyes shut tightly... and slowly opened them once more.

Yaegashi Taichi was standing in front of Yamaboshi High School in the middle of the night, looking up at the main building from the athletic field. Through the windows, he could see lights on in several of the classrooms.

Then he turned and looked over his shoulder. Outside the school gates, everything appeared to be perfectly normal... though it still felt a bit surreal to be on campus at night.

A sudden realization occurred to him, and he started to brush himself off. After lying facedown on the ground, surely his clothes were filthy—

“What the...?”

And yet his overcoat remained perfectly spotless. Next he checked his back, then his legs, but couldn't find any dirt. How was such a thing possible, when he was apparently

sprawled out on the athletic field for some indeterminate amount of time? And for another thing, *why* was he sprawled out on the athletic field? What was he doing here...?

Then a sharp, burning pain rose up the back of his skull, almost like an electric shock. He clutched his head, fighting the heat and pain. Now he remembered:

“That’s right!”

«Heartseed» had transported him here, to the place it referred to as the “Isolation Zone.”

Wait, but what makes me so sure this is ACTUALLY the Isolation Zone? It doesn’t LOOK like an alternate reality... so how did I know?

Sickening as it was, some part of him had believed it with certainty. Why? Was it more of «The Third»’s hypnotherapy, brainwashing all who entered in order to streamline the experiment?

Either way, he wasn’t going to find the answer by just standing around. Instead, he needed to investigate his surroundings.

“Where is everyone...?”

A chill settled over his heart. Just moments ago he was surrounded by his fellow clubmates, and yet he couldn’t see a single other person out here on the athletic field with him. No Nagase Iori, no Inaba Himeko, no Kiriya Yui, no Aoki Yoshifumi, no Enjouji Shino, no Uwa Chihiro.

Wasn’t «Heartseed» supposed to send them all to the Isolation Zone together?

“Did it only send me...?”

Or was he the only person left behind in the real world? Neither option appealed to him.

He took off running towards the school building. The first few steps didn’t cover much ground, but soon he hit his stride. If the lights were on, then surely someone had to be in there.

He couldn’t hear anything except the rustle of his coat, the crunch of his footsteps, and the sound of his own

breathing. The field was dark and vast, and in his mind, it felt endless—like he might never reach his destination. Nevertheless, he ran.

Maybe he was cut off from the rest of the world. Maybe he was all alone in the darkness. He came here to fight, and yet his body was filled with fear.

What happened? What's going on? Where am I? He didn't know. His panic was building... and with it, his terror was building, too...

Just then, he saw a shadow out of the corner of his eye—
“Gah!”

Hastily, he hit the brakes. Likewise, the figure stopped short. He hadn't noticed them approaching until they were nearly on top of him; evidently he'd been too focused on the school building directly ahead.

Taichi squinted through the darkness at the shadowy presence standing more than ten meters away. Her long hair fluttered in the gentle breeze. Her skin sparkled like the moon, and even from a distance, he could tell she had a great figure.

Wait...

“N-Nagase?!”

“Taichi?!”

It was Nagase Iori, president of the Cultural Research Club and resident jokester.

Christ, am I glad to see you.

“I'm so glad I found you! Holy crap! I thought I was alone out here!”

Evidently her experience here was similar to his. She dashed over to him at full speed.

“Whoa, hey, slow down! Am... Am I supposed to catch you or what?!”

“Taaaake... THIS!”

She stopped short right in front of him and karate-chopped him in the side.

“Gah! ...Where the heck did that come from...?”

“Oh, sorry! Everyone was gone, and I was convinced I was all alone out here on the athletic field, and I was starting to get really scared, so I was planning to go into the school building, but then I spotted you, and I was like ‘YAY!’ so I ran right over, and I was gonna leap into your arms, but then I remembered you have a girlfriend, so I decided to compromise with a karate chop!”

“You make no sense. Anyway, I’m glad we found each other. I was starting to get spooked out here, myself.”



“You too, huh? Did you wake up here on campus, or...? Let’s make sure we’re on the same page real quick!”

Taichi had no objections to this, so he readily agreed.

“First off, let’s go over the information we left with. So, we were told «The Third»’s group hatched a plan to cram half the school inside an ‘Isolation Zone’ for some kind of experiment.”

«The Third» and its posse («The Second» and «The Fourth») were all of the same species as «Heartseed». They had arrived in the real world in order to conduct some sort of large-scale experiment—so large, it required both prep work *and* a test run.

“Yeah. Supposedly they knew they were going to have to prep for a massive Record Wipe either way, so they wanted to go all-out with something really ‘entertaining’ first.”

Due to the sheer quantity of «Heartseed»-related memories the CRC had stored up, it would take a great deal of time and effort to erase those “records” from each individual member. Hence, they were essentially trying to get the most bang for their buck.

“Then Yukina-chan and some other track team girls got hit with the body-swap while some first-year boys were cursed with the Liberation... and then Misaki-chan lost her memories, possibly due to an emergency shutdown,” Nagase recounted carefully.

Indeed, victims of an active phenomenon could potentially be subject to what was known as an “emergency shutdown.” If word of the phenomenon began to spread, and/or if a significant societal scandal resulted, and/or if any of the participants suffered a mental breakdown—in other words, circumstances deemed too risky to proceed, lest repairing them prove complicated later on—the «Heartseed» in charge would initiate the emergency shutdown process. This process would potentially erase all memories pertaining to the subject’s fellow phenomenon victims.

“But our objective here is to prevent any more of those

emergency shutdowns,” Taichi stated firmly.

“Come to think of it, how are *our* memories doing?”

“I can still remember a bunch of stuff, so I think I’m fine... probably. I can’t think of anything I’m forgetting.”

That said, once those memories were erased, he wouldn’t even know they were gone in the first place. However, as far as he knew, they would be safe from the Record Wipe for the full duration of the Isolation Zone experiment.

“Now, about the Isolation Zone itself. According to all the rumors...”

—*Taken away somewhere.*

—*Unable to escape.*

—*Phenomena.*

—*Lasting several days.*

It was terrifying to *imagine*, let alone experience, all of these things combined.

“We have no idea how complicated this is gonna get, which is why we asked «Heartseed» to send us in here in the first place—so we could protect everyone. The last thing I remember is... all seven of us, together at Yamaboshi at night. That’s when we made the decision to come here,” Nagase recalled.

“Yeah, and then «Heartseed» was like ‘Let’s get going’ or something... and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground outside the school building,” Taichi nodded.

“You were on the *ground*? I was just standing.”

“But you were alone, right?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t see any of the others nearby. So then I started walking around, and that’s when I spotted you.”

“In that case, maybe the others are somewhere nearby. We should look for them.”

And so Taichi and Nagase moved away from the school building. Starting at the east end of the athletic field, they decided they would work their way all the way around to the opposite side.

The air felt... *somewhat* cold, but not especially. Above

them, a dark sheet of clouds covered the sky, except for one small hole through which they could see the full moon shining brightly. The field was awfully dark, but the light from the school building and neighboring offices helped them feel their way forward.

"This *is* the Isolation Zone, right?" Nagase asked, after a few minutes of walking.

"I think so... assuming «Heartseed» didn't screw up, at least."

It was just a feeling he had; there was nothing concrete he could point to as proof.

"I mean, it really *feels* like we've gone to a different world, but... Wait a minute!" Hastily, Nagase started digging in her pockets. "Our cell phones! Duh!"

"Oh, right," Taichi muttered. How could he have forgotten this essential piece of modern technology?

"This way we can get in touch with Inaban and... Wait, what the? No service?"

"Same here."

All around them, the trees rustled in the wind.

"Now that I think about it, I've never *not* had service at school bef—Hey!"

Suddenly, Nagase took off running in the direction of the front gates. Perplexed, Taichi followed after her. Then, as he came within just five meters from the gate, he caught up to her, and together they ran side by side.

"What's the matter?"

"Our school's situated on a pretty busy street. Day or night, there's always the occasional car passing by. So why does it feel like the road's deserted?"

"Good point." That definitely wasn't normal. "Maybe we should step out real quick and see if we can get any service."

He checked his phone again, but it still didn't have any bars.

"Yeah, maybe... There's at least a chance Inaban and the

others are out there, right?"

"Right. Let's find them so we can formulate a plan."

"Yeah! We came here to help everyone, and by golly, we're gonna!"

Pause.

"...So, uh..."

"...Um..."

They both took a deep breath and asked in unison:

"Why haven't we reached the gates yet?"

They could only get so close to the edge of campus before they found themselves unable to make progress. Their feet were still moving, and it physically *felt* like they were getting closer... and yet they didn't.

This space was isolated from the outside world, and there was no hope of leaving.

"Haah... haah... I guess... no amount of running... will do us any good..."

At last, Nagase threw in the towel and dropped to the ground. As for Taichi, he had given up much sooner than she had.

They were now face to face with the fact that this world was *not normal*. Perhaps it was safe to say that this was indeed the Isolation Zone.

Taichi had chosen to come here and fight of his own volition, and as such, he had no regrets... but he couldn't pretend he wasn't a little frightened. This was «The Third»'s little dollhouse, and anything could happen. It was possible they were being watched right that very moment.

Regardless, he had no intention of giving up the fight.

"We need to find them, fast."

"Yeah," Nagase agreed.

They started walking, keeping their eyes peeled as they moved across campus, cutting across the athletic field from east to west.

And yet... there was still no sign of anyone else.

"They're nowhere..."

"Maybe we should try calling their names? Or... on second thought, maybe not," Nagase murmured nervously.

"Let's keep a low profile for a little longer," Taichi suggested.

Together, they forged a path through the dark, vast wasteland. This would be unthinkable alone, but as long as they had each other, they had the strength to carry on. Unfortunately, with five pieces of their heptagon still missing, their light was yet dim...

"Psst! Hey, Nagase! I see people!" Taichi hissed, pointing in the distance at the shifting shadows.

"What? Oh wow, you're right! How many are there? One, two, three, four..."

"Maybe it's the rest of the club! Let's go see."

And so, with high hopes, they took off running in the direction of the group. However, they soon realized these other people were *not* in fact the rest of the CRC, but rather —

"Whoa, it's Iori! Oh, and Yaegashi-kun!"

"N-Nakayama-chan?!"

Nagase's good friend from Class 2-B, Nakayama Mariko, came bouncing over. With her high pigtails, she looked like a bunny rabbit.

"Oh my godddd, Ioriii!"

"Nakayama-chan!"

The two shared a tight hug.

"Boy, am I glad to see you! But at the same time, I'm kinda *not* glad! You really shouldn't be here right now. Everybody's going crazy!"

"Yeah, I know. What about you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but the school sure as heck isn't! One minute it gets all dark, and then the next thing I know, everything's all *weird*! And our phones aren't getting any service!"

As it turned out, Taichi and Nagase weren't the only two people trapped in this world. For a moment, this came as a

relief... but at the same time, it was *devastating*. These people were victims, trapped inside against their will.

"And you can't leave, either. I just tried. No luck!" another voice called from behind Nakayama. "Guess we really are stuck in here... You know, it kinda feels like we've been teleported to a different world and can't get home..."

It was Setouchi Kaoru, president of Class 2-B, her expression dubious. As she tilted her head, her short hair swayed, and the light glinted off her cartilage piercings.

"Kaoru-chan, too? Is everyone here someone we're close to...?" Nagase whispered fretfully.

"Huh? What was that?" Setouchi asked.

Nagase pursed her lips together and shook her head. "It's nothing."

But she wasn't the only one starting to feel guilty about the CRC's role in this. Taichi felt it, too.

"Are you guys with them?" Taichi asked, pointing to the two guys a short distance away.

"Gahhh! It won't work! Damn it!" shouted Watase Shingo, another classmate in 2-B. He looked like he was trying to run to the fence, but he stopped short and turned back. "Oh hey, it's Yaegashi and Nagase. Didn't know you two were together." The spiky-haired prettyboy(?) of the soccer team heaved a big sigh. "Well, don't get your hopes up. Not even I've managed to get out."

"It doesn't look like Yaegashi's worried about that."

Next to Watase was Ishikawa Daiki, yet another classmate in 2-B. With his calm, composed demeanor, large build, and close-cropped hair, he was the very picture of a stoic Japanese warrior. And yet, believe it or not, he was currently in a relationship with bright and bubbly Nakayama Mariko.

The four of them were all wearing winter coats over their school uniforms.

"Huh? What's wrong, you two? You don't seem too thrilled," Watase commented.

"Oh... Sorry..."

"Of course they're not going to be thrilled, Watase-kun! Think about where we are!" Setouchi retorted, possibly because she could tell Taichi was off his game.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, Madam President."

"Don't worry about us. Anyway, what's been going on?" Taichi asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Setouchi.

"What's been going on with the school? And where are the others? Tell us everything you know!" Nagase chimed in, pleading with her hands clasped together.

"Uhhh... I mean... where have you *been*, lori? What have you been doing for the past three hours since we all got here?" asked Nakayama.

At this, Taichi pulled out his cell phone to check the time: 7:30 PM. But back in the real world, when they departed for the Isolation Zone, it was already *way* later than that.

Clearly «Heartseed» wasn't joking when it told them time passed differently in here. No point in trying to do the math.

"Well... uh... we showed up late, I guess you could say," Nagase stammered.

"We can't expect everyone to have had the exact same experience we did," Ishikawa told the others. All in all, he was a rather thoughtful and understanding guy.

"Okay then, I'll give you the rundown," said Watase. "One minute I was at home, and the next, I was back at school again, in the middle of the night, in my uniform. And apparently I didn't walk here... Real talk, this whole world feels *different* somehow. It's a total mystery. Anyway, there are a lot of other people around, and their stories are all pretty similar... Wait, do you care about that part?"

"Go ahead and tell us the whole story. Please."

"You're really serious about this, huh? Well, anyway. None of our phones can get any service, and something... *supernatural*... is keeping us from being able to leave campus, so... nobody really knows what to do."

"There are a *lot* of people here, too. Dozens of them.

Maybe even a hundred,” Setouchi mused.

Taichi swallowed hard.

Even Nakayama frowned. “Yeah, this is a total tire fire... But y’know, it’s *weird* how accurate those rumors were!”

Indeed, back in the real world, Yamaboshi High School was rife with rumors about the Isolation Zone.

“Looking back, you’re right,” Ishikawa nodded casually. Likewise, Nakayama only seemed mildly perplexed. Both of them were completely under-reacting—proof that they were hypnotized. Otherwise they would surely be panicking right about now.

Watase let out an aggrieved sigh and continued, “Anyway, everyone wants to get home ASAP, so we’ve all been trying to figure something out.”

“Hence, we’ve been doing everything we can think of,” Ishikawa chimed in.

“Gotcha. So what’s everyone else up to? We haven’t seen anyone except you guys. Are they panicking?”

Watase’s group seemed relatively calm and collected, but Taichi was concerned about the rest.

“It’s a mixed bag. Some people are just sitting around. Others are attempting to leave campus. But no one’s all that panicked about it. Why would they be?”

“Because... they’re trapped in a strange place...?”

“It’s not *that* strange, is it? It’s just Yamaboshi. People are forced to take shelter in public places for all sorts of reasons—heavy storms, for example. I think you’re taking this a bit too seriously, Yaegashi.”

Apparently, to Ishikawa and the others, this situation was on par with a typhoon warning.

“But obviously some groups are more panicky than others,” Nakayama cut in.

“What do you mean?” Nagase asked.

Nakayama furrowed her brow dubiously. “I mean, like... depending on the phenomenon you got stuck with, you might be freaking out a *lot*, right? That’s why we’ve all split

off into groups with other people who have the same phenomenon.”

With this statement, plus all the rumors and everything else that had happened thus far, it was suddenly very clear what was going on in the Isolation Zone. *This* was what «The Third»’s group had been prepping for all this time.

“So what phenomenon do you guys have?” Taichi asked. Their answer: “We’re not... entirely sure yet.”

Question: dodged.

After exchanging a bit more information, the two groups went their separate ways; Taichi and Nagase left to search for the rest of the CRC, while Nakayama’s group went back to testing potential ways to escape Yamaboshi.

“Now then, I think it’s time—” Taichi began.

“—to find our friends!” Nagase finished enthusiastically, although it felt a bit forced.

Nakayama’s group had told them there were more people inside the school building, so that was where they headed.

“Well, the lights are on in there, so it makes sense that that’s where they went. Plus, running water and plumbing, y’know.”

Although they had no way of contacting the outside world, they had everything they needed to survive, according to Nakayama and the others. On one hand, this was good news... but on the other hand, it kind of felt like «The Third» was planning to keep them as pets.

After a brief stint of walking, they came across another group—five female students hanging out near the pool on the west side of campus. They were all fellow second-years that Taichi had met previously; he seemed to remember them being classmates with Inaba and Aoki.

“Ugh... Still no freakin’ cell service!”

“I was at home! Why am I back here? Are we seriously stuck here for the night?”

“Kinda seems that way, yeah.”

"Oh my godddd... But I didn't set my TV to record my shows... I hope my mom remembers to do it for me..."

"Uggghhh... Why us...? This sucks!"

From the way they talked, one would think they'd simply missed their train home. They would have been justified in having a total mental breakdown, and yet they had accepted their circumstances with a shrug.

"Hey guys, uh... how's it going?" Nagase called out.

"Hi there, Nagase-san. And Yaegashi-kun."

"Oh, heyyyy! Didn't know you guys were here!"

The girls greeted them warmly, which came as a relief.

"We're looking for Inaba and Kiriya and Aoki. Have you seen them around?" Taichi asked them.

"Hmmm... I don't think so..."

"The Cultural Research Club all ended up in the same group, huh?"

"Yeah, y'know, more or less," Nagase replied vaguely.

"Seems like everybody's been grouped with their closest friends, so it makes sense. Seriously, get a load of this! You wanna hear about our phenomenon? We—"

Suddenly, all five girls froze perfectly still. There was an unnatural pause. And then they came to life once more.

"Wait, what the...? Where's Mao?"

"She's gone! Where did she go?"

"When did she wander off?"

"She was just here a minute ago..."

Four of the girls started to look around.

But Taichi and Nagase could only stare in disbelief.

Because the fifth girl, a tall girl by the name of Mao, was standing right there. But the other four were acting like they couldn't see her.

"W-Wait a minute... Guys, I'm right here! Hello? Look at me! I'm *right here!*" she pleaded, trembling.

"I *told* her we need to stay together as a group."

"I'M RIGHT HERE!" Mao shouted, grabbing at the other girl's clothes.

Taichi couldn't take it anymore. "Look right in front of you."

But the girl simply stared blankly. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

She seemingly had no idea that her friend was grabbing her and screaming.

Mao stumbled backwards a few steps, then turned to Taichi and Nagase.

"Hey... Can *you* see me? I'm right here, aren't I?"

She looked like she was on the verge of tears, so Nagase ran over to her. "Don't worry. It's gonna be okay."

"Yeah, I know. I know the rules. I don't know *how* I know them, but I do... One person 'disappears' from the rest of the group, and while you're invisible, everyone else suddenly forgets how the phenomenon works..."

"Oh, I get it now."

As far as Taichi could tell, this was some kind of spontaneous "ghost" phenomenon, where one member would be essentially blocked off from the rest of the group. And if the other members couldn't remember the rules, that would explain why they thought the victim had simply "wandered off." Meanwhile, the victim could only watch helplessly as they were erased from perception.

"Why are you both muttering to yourselves?" one of the girls asked suspiciously.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Taichi.

"Don't worry about it," said Nagase.

"You know, it really feels like Mao has trouble following instructions sometimes," one of the others commented.

"Totally. She's so free-spirited... but at the same time, she can't really read the room."

"Sometimes I really wish she'd stop making things more difficult for the rest of us."

"Especially during a time like this! God, she can be so annoying."

The conversation was starting to take a nasty turn, so

Taichi decided to try to set things back on track.

"Well, this is a really stressful time for everyone. Maybe something came up, you know?"

"Something conveniently just 'came up'? That's ridi—"

Once again, without warning, all five girls froze perfectly still.

"...Oh, Mao, there you are! Where the heck did you go?! We were worried sick about you!"

Evidently the phenomenon had ended... for now.

"Yeah! You really need to tell us before you wander off. We were about to go looking for you!"

But Mao had heard everything, and her smile wasn't quite genuine.

After saying goodbye to the group of girls, Taichi and Nagase headed off toward the school building.

"Well, that sure was awkward," Nagase remarked, glancing furtively over her shoulder like she was reluctant to leave them.

"Their phenomenon's definitely screwing with them," Taichi replied.

So far, they had met two different groups of phenomenon victims.

"I wonder how many other groups are out there... For now, we need to investigate," Nagase declared, though panic was audible in her voice.

She was right, however. Their first order of business would be to establish an understanding of the scale at which they would need to operate... but that was a massive undertaking for just two people. They were critically lacking in manpower.

Where are the others? We need to hurry and find them before—

"I told you, STAY AWAY!" a boy's voice called out sharply. Fear instinctively spiked in Taichi's chest.

"Was that...?"

“Over by the gym.”

“We should probably go check it out, right?”

“Right.”

With a nod, Taichi and Nagase took off in the direction of the voice. His stomach was doing somersaults.

Then they caught sight of a few people standing in the hallway that ran around the gym.

“Stay away! STAY AWAY!” the boy screamed over and over. He was surrounded by three girls and one other guy.

“Just calm down, okay?”

“Relax! Seriously!”

“It’s just the phenomenon!”

“We’re not going to do anything to you!”

“Sh-Shut up... Just stay away from me!”

Ignoring the rest of his group, the boy dashed off in the direction of Taichi and Nagase—

“AAAAAAHHH!”

—but the second he spotted them, he screamed, hit the brakes, and made a sharp right turn toward the athletic field. It all happened so fast, they could only watch him go.

No one attempted to chase after him. Instead, the rest of the boy’s group approached Taichi and Nagase. Evidently they felt obligated to explain the situation.

“Our phenomenon makes us see the people around us as hostile threats,” the other boy explained.

“So whenever it strikes, we get scared of everyone else around us,” one of the girls added. “It’s not Kubozuka’s fault he acted like that.”

“Please don’t hold it against us if it happens again, okay?” said another.

Now that they had explained the situation, the group went back to talking amongst themselves.

“Should we go after him?”

“Maybe I should go alone, just in case.”

“I don’t know... Maybe we should give him some space, you know? Some time to calm down.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said one of the girls as she turned back in Taichi’s direction. “Which phenomenon are you guys, anyway?”

He didn’t want to lie to her, so instead he borrowed the response he’d gotten from Nakayama’s group: “We haven’t quite figured it out yet.”

And with that, the two groups parted ways.

As the two of them walked in silence, Taichi’s mind raced. If there were more than a hundred students here... and they were all split into groups of four or five...

“Okay, Nagase, I think we need to come to terms with one thing in particular.”

In this world, every single person was affected by a phenomenon.



They entered the west wing, where the library and computer room were located. This area was more populated than the athletic field, and there were lights on in several of the rooms. That said, the groups were spread out sparsely. Some stayed in five-person clusters, while others traveled in smaller groups of two or three. At first it looked like there were only second-years in this area, but then they spotted some first-years, too.

Everyone was grouped with their friends, classmates, and/or clubmates. Maybe this was a conscious choice, or maybe it was simply natural to gravitate toward the people who shared the same phenomenon you did.

From the looks of it, there was no mass panic, either. The students they passed all greeted them warmly; possibly they felt a sense of camaraderie toward their fellow prisoners here in the Isolation Zone. But there was a palpable tension in the air. No one was willing to get too close to a group that wasn’t theirs.

Taichi and Nagase walked through the school, asking

around about the rest of the CRC. None of the people they spoke to seemed to be having a major crisis; they were either attempting to leave campus, attempting to contact the outside world, or simply sitting around.

In the end, their search of the West Wing proved fruitless.

"Worst-case scenario, we may need to start planning to handle this ourselves," Taichi muttered.

"Yeah. We gotta do what we gotta do," Nagase nodded.

Concealing their anxiety, they walked out of the building. There, they immediately heard the sounds of another argument; they stopped short to listen.

The screams reverberated off the walls, making it difficult to parse exactly what was being said... but they could tell that whatever it was, it was serious.

"Ugh... Not another fight," Nagase groaned quietly.

"Let's go," Taichi replied.

And so they took off running in the direction of the shouting. It sounded like it was coming from somewhere outside... Maybe behind the main building?

Sure enough, when they rounded the corner, they found a group of four boys standing in the secluded space behind the school, bickering.

"This is *your* fault!"

"No it isn't!"

The situation was volatile. It looked like they were both ready to pounce at a moment's notice. Then Taichi recognized them: they were the first-years who had been inflicted with the Liberation back in the real world.

"We should've just ignored that creep!"

"Ignore him?! Yeah, right!"

The argument showed no signs of stopping... but upon further inspection, Taichi realized that only two of the four were actively fighting. The other two were shouting things like "Come on, guys," and "Enough is enough." In other words, they were making a token attempt at mediating.

"This was *your* decision, and you were *wrong*! Now look

where it's gotten us! After everything we went through, now we're stuck here! You need to get us out of this!"

"Don't blame *me* just because *you* couldn't make up your mind!"

"Say that again!"

Incensed, one of the boys struck the other on the shoulder.

"Ow! You piece of shit!"

Now that the line had been crossed, the other boy didn't hold back. Nagase and Taichi ran in to intervene.

"Stop it!"

"Everyone just relax!"

But they were nowhere near close enough to stop them. Meanwhile, the other two boys were starting to panic.

"Guys, come on!"

"This is going too far and you know it!"

They each ran around behind one of the arguing boys and attempted to physically peel them off of each other.

"The hell, man?!"

"I told you, it's time to stop!"

"Let go of me!"

"Only if you promise not to hit each other!"

Fortunately, the arguing boys were unable to overpower the boys that stopped them, and so a distance was established between them. That was when Taichi and Nagase arrived on the scene.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"...Oh, uh, hey..."

One of the less combative first-years bowed his head in greeting. The squabblers both looked away awkwardly, probably out of embarrassment that they had an audience.

"I know it's none of our business, but we really shouldn't be fighting each other," Nagase explained.

Fortunately, these first-years had already received advice from the CRC in the past, so they were willing to listen. But then the two mediator boys started asking questions:

"You guys in the CRC know a lot about this stuff, right? So what exactly is going on? First it happened to us in real life, and now we've... moved on to Level 2, it feels like..."

"Does it ever stop? For what it's worth, the guy gave us an explanation back in the real world... but he never said he was gonna drag us in here!"

"Even we don't know exactly what's happening," Taichi replied.

"But it'll definitely come to an end eventually," Nagase added.

Admittedly they felt somewhat pressured to play it safe with their answers.

"I know you said we shouldn't be fighting, but... with this phenomenon, we don't really have a choice."

"Wait, but... all that stuff that happened back in the real world... That still happened, right? Because this stupid phenomenon made us get in a ton of fights! It totally ruined our reputations!"

They vented all their complaints one after another, like they'd finally found someone they could turn to.

"I can't really explain it, but just trust me—it's all the phenomenon's fault, so it'll work out eventually!" Nagase reassured them. Granted, she had no way of proving this, but fortunately the first-years believed her regardless.

"...Well, now that everybody else is dealing with their own phenomena, at least now they might believe us when we tell them we didn't mean to..."

"Exactly. See? So you guys should try to come to an understanding and forgive each other. That fight wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the phenomenon," Taichi declared. After all, their goal in coming here was to keep the peace.

But the two squabblers were still glaring reproachfully at each other.

"That wasn't caused by the phenomenon," they stated in perfect unison.

So... it wasn't the Liberation that had made them start fighting? Perhaps this fracture ran a lot deeper than they thought. But Taichi knew he had to say something.

"But... if it wasn't for the phenomenon, you wouldn't have ended up—huh?"

He couldn't believe his eyes, and subsequently, his mouth stopped working.

"Hmm? Wh-... What the heck?!" Nagase shouted.

The two more amicable first-years rubbed their eyes in confusion... because the more hostile pair had vanished from sight.

They were standing right there a second ago. Could they have run off in that timeframe? No, surely not; Taichi had only taken his eyes off them for a few seconds at most. It was physically impossible. So what happened?

"Your phenomenon doesn't involve people disappearing, does it...?" Taichi muttered to himself without expecting anyone to answer.

"How should we know? All we know is, you guys called it the Liberation," one of the guys replied in a shaky, unsteady voice.

Was this a new phenomenon they weren't aware of, or...?

"...They disappeared...?" a female voice whispered. But it wasn't Nagase.

A girl was watching them from around the corner of the school building, possibly drawn over by the sound of the commotion. A girl with wavy, bleached hair.

It was Kurihara Yukina.

Why was she here? And why was she alone? She was the first person they'd witnessed walking around on her own thus far.

Then Taichi realized: come to think of it, Kurihara was another student who had experienced a phenomenon prior to the Isolation Zone. She and four other members of the track team had been cursed with the body-swap. And one of them, Oosawa Misaki, had broken down completely, at which

point «The Third» had erased her memories of her friends.

“Did they just disappear...?”

“Wh-What are you doing by yourself, Yukina-chan? Wait... did you see them disappear?” Nagase asked her. Evidently she wasn’t sure what to ask first; honestly, neither was Taichi.

“I was... looking for Misaki. Nobody else wanted to leave the clubroom, so I left without them.”

Without her memories, it was possible Oosawa Misaki was out wandering around by herself.

“Gotcha. Well... I can’t say for sure, but... maybe she’s not here at all?”

“No, she definitely is. I saw her with my own two eyes—”

But before she could finish, there was a crackle of static.

“Testing, testing. Can you hear me out there?” a voice called through the loudspeakers. “This is your student council president, Katori Jouji, speaking to you from the broadcasting room. I understand you’re all going through a stressful time right now, but I’d like everyone to meet up in the gymnasium. And I mean *everyone*.”



One by one, students filed into the gym, fear and confusion plain to see on their faces. Once they saw the other people gathered there, however, their expressions all softened slightly in relief.

“This sure is a lot of people,” said Nagase.

“Sure is,” said Taichi.

They were among the first to arrive, at which point they started watching the gym entrance, observing everyone who came in after them.

Following the loudspeaker announcement, the incident with Kurihara and the first-years was put on the back burner. The two first-years headed straight into the gym, while Kurihara left to go fetch the other track team members.

Ultimately, it was decided that the two missing boys would “probably turn up sooner or later.” Sure, maybe it was problematic to shrug it off for the time being, but it was still more pragmatic than believing that two students had physically vanished into thin air.

But Taichi had his eye on a third possibility. One that hinted at a much more horrifying reality...

“Taichi? You look like you’re zoning out. Are you okay?”

“Oh, sorry... Just got lost in thought for a second.”

Meanwhile, four more people walked into the gym. There were now fifty or sixty people gathered here, all of them split into rough groups based on grade level. These groups were then further divided between the sexes.

And yet...

“Where’s Yui, and Aoki, and Inaban?”

“Not to mention Chihiro and Enjouji...”

More and more students kept walking in, but the five missing members of the CRC had yet to show up. It was terrifying to think «The Third»’s group was powerful enough to experiment on all these people at the same time... and they’d have to manage all these people on their own... and they had no idea what to expect...

All of this was resting on Taichi’s shoulders. He wanted to protect everyone in the Isolation Zone, but at the same time, he felt like he might be crushed under the weight of that desire. He wasn’t sure he and Nagase could really pull it off on their own.

“Whoa, the place is packed...”

“This is why I kept saying we should hurry, Watase-kun!”

In walked Watase and Nakayama, joined by the rest of their group.

“Hey there. Long time no see,” Setouchi joked in Nagase’s direction.

“Gosh, it’s been *ages*. Like thirty whole minutes,” Nagase joked back.

“I found some more familiar faces,” Ishikawa told Taichi.

“Who was it?”

“Oh, Yaegashi! And Nagase-san!”

It was Miyagami. Taichi could recognize his wavy hair and rectangular glasses anywhere.

“Oh, hey. Y’know, I had a feeling you’d be here, Yaegashi,” said Sone, the chubby guy who walked in after him.

Miyagami was in the Photography Club and Sone was in the Manga Club, but they were still close friends despite that, probably because they were both in Class 2-B with Taichi. Likewise, two more guys walked in behind them, also from Class 2-B. Perhaps they all shared the same phenomenon.

“Everyone gather ‘round!” one of the student council members called.

“Let’s head over, Yaegashi,” said Watase as they started walking.

“Did you find Yui-chan or any of the others?” Nakayama asked Nagase.

“Not yet,” Nagase replied.

“Huh? You still haven’t found them?” Setouchi asked, surprised. “In that case, they’re probably not here. And that’s a good thing! It means they don’t have to suffer through this nightmare.”

“...Right...”

“I don’t know who all is in your group or what phenomenon you have, but if Inaba-san and the others aren’t here, then you have to just accept that.”

She had a point, of course. But she was so matter-of-fact about it that it made Taichi’s blood run cold. She was perfectly rational and level-headed—so how did she fail to see these circumstances as supernatural? Was this the hypnotherapy at work? Did it leave their common sense untouched while only fiddling with the bare minimum needed to keep their minds functioning?

However, in a way, this brought him to his senses. They really did need to start moving past it.

“Nagase... It’s possible the rest of the club won’t get here for a long while.”

“Right. In the meantime, let’s try to figure something out.”

Their only option was to look ahead.

In this world, «they» were in charge. These students were cut off from the real world and plagued with phenomena. Plus, the Record Wipe was waiting in the wings to snatch their memories away from them.

Taichi could feel his gait growing heavy. His heart tightened in his chest, apprehensive of the Herculean task ahead of them.

But then, just a moment later, he suddenly found his feet. It was a strange and startling feeling—like someone had flipped a switch and he could move again. Where did that come from? Confused, he turned around.

It was Inaba Himeko, and Kiriya Yui, and Aoki Yoshifumi, and Uwa Chihiro, and Enjouji Shino. All five of them were standing shoulder to shoulder at the entrance to the gym.

Inaba, with her slender body and sharp, angular features. Kiriya, with her long, tawny locks and feisty attitude. Aoki, with his lanky build and laid-back vibes. Chihiro, with his messy asymmetrical hair and stoic expression. And Enjouji, with her soft, poofy aesthetic. The mere sight of them was enough to warm Taichi’s heart.

These five people were always there for him, no matter what. They were his pillars of support. And now, with the addition of himself and Nagase, the Cultural Research Club was complete.

Odd, really, how much stronger he felt now that they were all together.

“Inaba... Yui... Aoki... Shino-chan... Chee-hee...!”

He could hear the emotion in Nagase’s voice as she called their names... and he didn’t have to look at her to know that she was grinning from ear to ear.

“The hell? You guys beat us here? Why didn’t you tell us?” Inaba scoffed.

“Our phones are all out of service, remember?” he retorted.

But Taichi could sense a warmth in her words that dulled their bite.

“Uh, Inabacchan? Weren’t you literally just crying over the possibility that Taichi wasn’t he—GUH!”

In exchange for his unnecessary comment, Aoki received a kick from Inaba.

“I... I wasn’t *wishing I could be in your arms* or anything, got it?!”

And for the first time since he arrived in the Isolation Zone, Taichi laughed.

As it turned out, Inaba and the others had arrived at the same time Taichi and Nagase had; they simply woke up in a different part of campus.

First things first, they took turns relaying the information they had acquired. Sure enough, they were all on the same page: everyone at Yamaboshi had been divided into groups of four or five and cursed with a phenomenon. No one had found a way out. And according to Inaba’s group, the electricity and plumbing was all fully functional.

“Man, I don’t know what to say... I’m just so glad you guys made it in safely!” Nagase exclaimed, her tone bright enough to cancel out the gloom and misery all around them.

“‘Made it in’ doesn’t seem to really describe it, but yeah, I guess that’s true. I’m not sure I can say we’re ‘safe,’ though,” Inaba muttered with a scowl. Then her expression softened, as if to shrug it off.

“We were, like, SUPER worried about you two!” Kiriyaama exhaled, clutching at her chest.

“Yeah, I was starting to think we’d never find you,” Taichi replied. “I even told Nagase we might have to handle it all ourselves... I’m glad I was wrong.”

"T-Taichi-senpai and Iori-senpai, bravely fighting the phenomena all on their own... I can picture you like a superhero duo!" Enjouji gushed, her eyes shining. Truth be told, it was a rather flattering compliment.

"Hey, Shino-chan! Don't forget, I was just sayin' the five of us might have to take care of business on our own! Remember?"

"Yes, Aoki-senpai, but it *carries weight* coming from Taichi-senpai."

"Nngh... I guess a team of two *is* a lot cooler than a team of five..."

"I'm talking about his voice."

"So nothing I say will ever be good enough?!"

"I'm amazed you people can goof off at a time like this," Chihiro muttered under his breath.

"This Isolation Zone is actually quite elaborate. It's the perfect cage to keep their guinea pigs in," Inaba remarked. "From here on, we're fighting on enemy turf... and there's no guarantee we'll make it out unscathed."

"Oh my god, Inaba! I mean, you're totally right and all, but chill out a little!" Kiriya cut in nervously.

"Let me finish. Now then... what is it that we came here to do?"

If they had minded their own business, they could have avoided this whole mess. They could have stayed out of it. They could have drawn a line between themselves and the rest of the world; while perhaps it was irresponsible, at least that way they could have avoided any danger.

But Taichi and the rest of the CRC had vowed to stop putting their heads in the sand. After all, the "rest of the world" was still *their world*. They were all connected. And if a bunch of outsiders were trying to erase it against their will, then they weren't about to sit around and just let it happen.

"We came here to protect our world," Taichi declared.

"Heh heh! Spoken like a true leader! That's our Taichi, alright," Aoki grinned.

The others were grinning, too, as unthinkable as it was in a situation like this. Even Inaba was smiling warmly. But then her expression turned serious.

"Alright then. Let's go."

That was Taichi's cue to take a step forward.

He couldn't pretend he wasn't scared or nervous. But with courage, vision, and a little help from his friends, he could overcome that fear and move past it.

While the CRC was having its happy little reunion, more and more people had shuffled into the gym. From the looks of it, there were now nearly a hundred people in there.

"Wonder when *you-know-who* will show up..."

"No clue, but we can't count on it, Taichi. We need to plot our strategy under the assumption that we're on our own... Oh, looks like it's starting."

"Is this just about everyone? Alright, uh, everyone move in close to the front," said the voice over the loudspeaker.

The CRC had gathered near the gym entrance, so they decided to move closer to the rest of the crowd. Onstage, one person was speaking into a microphone: Katori Jouji, the second-year student who currently held the office of student council president.

"Prez!"

"What's going on here?!"

"Can you fix this?!"

The crowd shouted up at him desperately, but Katori remained calm, as if this were any other school assembly.

"I'm broadcasting this over the school intercom system, so you should all be able to hear me, regardless of where you are. But if you haven't made it to the gym yet, please do so! Anyway, this is student council president Katori speaking."

With delicate, pointed features, an athlete's build, and the unshakeable confidence of a public speaker, it was no wonder people rallied around him. He was the very model of

a leader.

“What’s he doing up there?” Inaba grumbled.

Back when «The Third»’s group was wreaking havoc on the real world, Katori had grilled the CRC over it. Then, once the CRC was finally ready to work together with him, he dropped them like yesterday’s news. Hence, it was no surprise that Inaba had a less-than-positive opinion of him. (That said, Katori was right in thinking they had some connection to the rumors, so it wasn’t really his fault.)

“I know things are complicated for all of us right now. Here we are, stuck at Yamaboshi in the middle of the night, and none of us can remember how we got here. Even worse, we’re all dealing with these... strange phenomena.”

As he discussed the present circumstances, it became clear that his understanding of the situation was about the same as theirs. The only additional information was that they couldn’t get the TVs or internet to work.

“So yeah, obviously this is less than ideal. I’m sure we’ll all be able to go home soon, but I don’t know exactly when that will be, so we’ll all need to wait patiently for the time being. In the meantime, the student council will manage everything, so I ask for your cooperation in these trying times.”

Ordinarily, no one would “wait patiently” in a terrifying situation like this. Clearly the hypnotherapy was in full effect.

“First, I’d like to take roll in order to get an idea of how many people are here, so I’ll be having the student council collect signatures from everyone. Once that’s finished, I want you all to go to your respective first-year or second-year classrooms and wait there. Anyone associated with either the student council or the outreach committee will be wearing one of these armbands, so follow their instructions.”

He indicated the “Student Council” armband on his arm. Then, once he finished his speech, everyone got to work. The members of the student council and outreach

committee were all holding clipboards; students lined up in front of them to write their names.

"In... In the spirit of cooperation, we should probably line up too, right?" Enjouji asked, and Taichi nodded.

There were separate lines for first- and second-years, so this was where the group (briefly) parted ways with Enjouji and Chihiro.

"Also, if you have any feedback, feel free to let us know," Katori called.

At this, someone promptly shouted, "Can you tell us what exactly is going on?"

"I don't have any concrete answers, no."

"Why bother taking roll? Can't we just leave in the morning?" someone else shouted anxiously.

"This is just a precaution, that's all. Rest assured, we're not just going to be sitting around; we'll be testing out different ways to go home ASAP."

"By 'we,' you mean the student council?"

"Correct. You can leave it to us."

No matter what question was asked, Katori had an answer prepared, and the crowd was clearly impressed:

"Nice to see a student council president actually get things done for a change."

"Who needs teachers when we've got him?"

"Right?"

"Katori-kun's really taking charge, huh? Feels like he might actually get this Isolation Zone under control," Nagase commented quietly as she gazed up at him.

"He's a handsome athlete with perfect grades. Of course everyone's going to want to pay attention to him."

"You really seem to like this guy, Yui... I'm kinda concerned..."

"Feels like he's all talk, if you ask me. He'd better hope it doesn't backfire." Evidently Inaba wasn't as starry-eyed as everyone else. "But... I can understand why it speaks to them, since they're under hypnosis and all."

"What do you mean?" Taichi asked.

"They're acting like we're only stuck here because there's a big flood or something. They're nervous, but they're not terrified. They want to go home, but they've accepted that they have to be patient. At the same time, they still want an estimate of when this will all be over... Not that I've ever been in that kind of catastrophic situation, but I figure this is what it would be like. Am I right?"

"Completely." In both scenarios, they would be stuck at school with no way of contacting anyone on the outside.

Then it was Taichi's turn to write his name, so they had to pause the conversation.

Yaegashi Taichi, Class 2-B.

One of the student council outreach committee members in charge of the second-year roll call noticed him and spoke up: "Why, hello there."

It was Fujishima Maiko, Taichi's fellow classmate and de facto leader of the outreach committee.

"I notice your whole club's been dragged into this mess."

"Hey, Fujishima!" Inaba beckoned to her, and together, the six of them stepped away from the crowd.

"Listen, um... I'm sorry for pointing the finger at you over the rumors. I admit, it's made things very awkward between me and the President."

"Meh, I'm over it," Inaba replied wearily. "You know, it's not like you to be so timid."

"L-Look, I'm only human! When I make mistakes, of course I'm going to feel bad!"

"Forget it, alright? I wanted to ask you... Was it Katori's idea to do this roll call?"

"Yes, it was."

"So he's guiding the student council to keep everything under control?"

"There's four council members and four committee members, so we decided we'd team up to handle it. I know we're all struggling right now, but we're hoping the

President can bring everyone together.”

“That’s... That’s kind of impressive, actually,” Taichi remarked. After all, he knew full well just how hard it was to try to help other people while also having to deal with an active phenomenon.

“Depends on how long you can make it last. The only reason everyone is going along with you right now is because they don’t have anyone else,” Inaba scoffed.

“God, Inaba! They’re doing their best, okay?” Kiriya scolded her.

“Of course we are. It’s our job,” Fujishima replied, smoothing out the wrinkles on her armband. “For that matter, why are you talking as if the CRC... Actually, never mind.”

Just then, Enjouji and Chihiro returned from the first-year section.

“Hey guys!”

“We’re all set.”

“Greetings, Enjouji-san and Uwa-kun. I see you two are here as well.”

“G-Great work out there, Fujishima-senpai!” Enjouji blurted out with a firm salute.

“Nice to see you, Fujishima-san,” Chihiro added, inclining his head.

“Wait... You guys know each other?” Aoki asked, confused.

“We’ve forged an unbreakable bond as fellow comrades. The rest of you wouldn’t understand,” Fujishima grinned. Her glasses glinted as she slid them up her nose.

For a moment, it felt like the old, mischievous Fujishima was back. This came as a bit of a relief.

“Anyway. Are the seven of you all under the same phenomenon? Or are there multiple groups?”

“Oh, that... We’re all one big group, yeah,” said Inaba. But Taichi didn’t fault her for lying, since being honest would only make things more complicated.

“Understood. This is just a suggestion, but if you’re all

feeling up to it, would you be willing to assist us?"

"Assist you how?" asked Nagase.

"Well, for some unknown reason, we were all chosen to be trapped at this school. And we all need to get home safely. But with a total population of this size, *someone* needs to establish a system of order."

"I second this request," called a voice from the stage. He hopped down and walked over with a sunny smile on his face. "I get the feeling the CRC could manage it. You're all... different from the rest, somehow."

It was student council president Katori Jouji.



“Right at this moment, it feels as though you’re outsiders, observing from a neutral position... Quite the impressive feat at a time like this.”

An astute observation, Taichi thought. After all, he was right—they weren’t actually victims of the Isolation Zone.

“Or maybe it only looks that way because *you’re* an outsider,” Inaba shot back.

“Inaba!” Taichi cautioned, since it sounded like she was trying to pick a fight.

“Meh, I’m not actually all that opposed to helping out. Let’s do it,” she shrugged.

And since no one else had any objections, the matter was decided.

“Alright, so that’s eight of us and—wait, are you two in the CRC, too? What’re your names?”

“I’m Uwa.”

“E-E-Enjouji Shino, sir!”

“Uwa and Enjouji. Got it. You sure you first-years can handle it?”

“Y-Yes, sir! I mean, we came here to fight anyway...”

“Enjouji, keep your mouth shut!”

“Oh... Oops!”

“Haha! You two seem like good friends. I’m counting on you.”

Katori smiled affably, without a trace of ill intent. *Always the social butterfly.*

“So, seven people in the CRC. Altogether, that makes fifteen. With all of you working hard, I’m sure we’ll be able to put up a good fight.”

“Surely you don’t have to take it all upon yourself, do you?” asked Inaba.

His friendly façade dropped, and his eyes turned hard. “In these circumstances? Who else will?”

“Hey, Fujishima-san! Prez! It looks like we’ve got everybody’s names!” a perky girl shouted in Katori’s direction. A first-year, by the looks of it.

Instantly, the tension evaporated.

"Alright then, let's add them up," he commanded.

Meanwhile, Fujishima stepped forward to introduce the first-year. "Everyone, this is Adachi-san. She's a first-year in the student council outreach committee."

"Hi there! I'm Adachi! Nice to meetcha!" She bowed politely. Her low pigtails paired nicely with her athletic build.

"Oh, I know. CRC folks, why don't you help us out with this?"

And so the student council, outreach committee, and CRC all tallied up the signatures. Partway through, however, Katori realized it would be easier to simply use the student directory and mark off everyone who had signed the sheets. The final tally: 118 students.

"Only first- and second-years; no third-years present. Second-years are the overwhelming majority, making up about 70% of the population. No faculty present, either. Maybe we should have the first-years form one group, then split the second-years into two or three."

"Hey, Katori? Would you mind if we talked among ourselves real quick?" Inaba asked, now that the tally was complete.

"Oh, sure. Sorry about that."

"Thank you for all your help," Fujishima called out to them, a sentiment the other council and committee members echoed. And with that, the seven members of the CRC filed out of the gym.

Since the other students were told to wait in their respective classrooms for further instructions, hardly anyone else was around.

"*A hundred and eighteen people!*" Aoki exclaimed the second the door closed behind them, as if he just couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Sure is a lot, huh? But, like, at least we're not the only ones trying to get a handle on this. The student council's

really putting effort in,” KiriYama nodded. She seemed mildly nervous about the head count, but was otherwise optimistic.

“Inaban, what are your thoughts on the student council? It seemed like you were doing some digging back there.”

“Obviously they’re not completely safe, but Katori’s been pretty level-headed, so I think we can count on him. And setting aside his holier-than-thou attitude, he’s right about one thing: I don’t think we could have pulled this off in his place.”

There was no need for the CRC to handle everything themselves. It made so much more sense for all of them to cooperate.

“We should try to work together with them. There’s a limit to what we can achieve on our own, and since we’ve got a bunch of leader types in here... it might actually work out, you know?”

“Frankly, I really wasn’t expecting these people to be so calm, given the phenomena,” Chihiro remarked.

“Agreed,” Inaba nodded. “Their fear of the Isolation Zone is minimal at best, and they aren’t panicking about the phenomena, either. But we’re only just getting started. All «they» care about is what happens next.”

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead as they walked down the covered walkway. Now that they were outside, it was palpably colder, and yet not dramatically so. No need for overcoats.

“They want to see what happens after people come to terms with the phenomena... so in a way, this might be exactly what they planned.”

“S-Sounds like we’ve got our work cut out for us,” Enjouji muttered anxiously.

“*What happens next*, huh...” Nagase murmured to herself.

“If this is all going according to their plan... then how will they react once they find out we’ve invaded?” Taichi asked.

“No clue,” Inaba answered, shaking her head.

Did «The Third»'s group already know they were here? Were they taking steps to get rid of them? Or had they decided to simply let the CRC be? The more Taichi thought about it, the more his mood spiraled.

A moment later, voices called from behind them.

"Hey, guys."

"Sup, Uwa? Hi, Enjouji."

There stood the Liberation first-years... Well, two of them, anyway. The sight of them was a gut punch. After all, there was still a problem to be resolved—one that Taichi had put on the back burner after Katori's loudspeaker announcement.

"We, uh... We were just wondering if you've seen the other two, by any chance," one of them said to their fellow classmates Chihiro and Enjouji.

"You mean Kanda-kun and Horiguchi-kun?" Enjouji asked.

"Yeah, them."

The two bickering boys.

"I haven't seen them, no. Did you lose track of them after the assembly just now?" Chihiro asked.

They both shook their heads.

"They never came to the gym. Not that we saw."

"Were they unable to make it for some reason?" Inaba asked.

"I mean, they were with us before the assembly, but... they started fighting, and then... they disappeared."

"It happened so fast. Almost like they vanished into thin air... Nah, forget it. That's not possible... right?"

They looked at Taichi and Nagase for confirmation. But Taichi had no reassurance to offer.

After a moment of awkward silence, the two first-years seemed to give up. "Okay, well, see you around." And off they went.

"What was that about? Something going on between them and you two?" Inaba asked them.

"Well, we were talking to them at the time, and—"

“And then they vanished,” an icy voice cut in.

It was Kurihara Yukina, track team member and Kiriyama’s best friend.

“Yukina! There you... are...” Kiriyama’s uninhibited joy faltered in the face of the current circumstances.

“You have eerily apt timing,” Taichi muttered under his breath. It felt like she’d walked out right on cue.

“I was curious, so I tailed you.”

“...You tailed us?” Nagase repeated quietly, her voice tinged with a tiny hint of fear.

Not that Taichi blamed her. There was something unsettling about Kurihara’s eyes—almost like she was looking at them, but not really *seeing* them.

“Don’t worry about that part. Because I *know* those two boys vanished. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Yukina...?”

Kiriyama was visibly perplexed. After all, her best friend was acting like a woman possessed.

“And Misaki vanished the exact same way.”

Back in the real world, Oosawa Misaki was one of five girls cursed with the body-swap phenomenon. But at one point she had a mental breakdown—one that was evidently deemed worthy of an emergency shutdown. After that, she lost her memories of the phenomenon... as well as the friends who suffered through it alongside her.

“Maybe she was never here to begin with...?”

“Listen to me, Yui! I swear to you, she was here! I talked to her! But one moment she was here, the next she vanished! And now she’s isn’t anywhere!”

Chapter 2: The Battle Is Joined

Taichi and the others headed to Rec Hall Room 401, the CRC clubroom, with a highly unstable Kurihara in tow. At first they thought perhaps the phenomenon was what had rattled her so deeply, but evidently Kurihara had grown so obsessed with her search for Oosawa that she had stopped thinking straight. Thus, she needed some time to compose herself.

Taichi and Aoki were the first to reach the clubroom door. It was unlocked.

"Wait... Did they just make a friggin' carbon copy of the real world? Or is this actually still the real world and we're just stuck here?"

Indeed, this alternate-universe clubroom was *identical* to the way they had left it. After they entered, Nagase, Inaba, Enjouji, and Chihiro all followed.

"Y'know, I thought I had the whole school memorized, but the clubroom really is in a league of its own."

"If we're going to have a discussion, let's have it here. I doubt anyone will come and interrupt us."

"Yes, I agree! It feels like a safe zone, doesn't it?"

"You'd better hope so..."

Lastly, Kiriyama entered the room, pulling Kurihara by the hand.

"Come on in, Yukina. After you've had a minute to catch your breath, you can feel free to go find the track team if you..."

Without warning, Kurihara came to a sudden stop, jerking Kiriyama backwards slightly.

"Look, Yukina, you don't have to—"

"...Well, look who we have here..."

Suddenly, Kurihara was speaking *very* differently.

Almost as if... she was someone else altogether.

With slumped shoulders and a dead look in her eyes, her bleached hair and fashionable style all went to waste.

Someone... *something*... had possessed her.

“Who’s there?!” Taichi shouted, focusing all of his attention on [her]. Which one of them was it? If it was «The Third», there was no telling what it might try to pull.

“Oh, don’t worry... I’m on your side...?”

“So... you’re here to explain the situation? You?” Inaba asked cautiously.

“Yeah...?”

Its voice was light and airy, the polar opposite of firm. This was «The Second», and fittingly for its designation, this was the «Heartseed» that spoke to them with almost the same frequency as... well... «Heartseed». In that sense, perhaps they should have seen this coming.

Fortunately, «The Second» had already promised it wasn’t going to do anything to them.

“Well, I’d like it very much if you did. There’s just so much we don’t know... Honestly, I was getting tired of waiting for «Heartseed» to show up, so you’ll do.”

Meanwhile, the two first-years whispered among themselves:

“Is this the one they told us about...?”

“Y-You mean... «The Second»-san...?”

For Chihiro and Enjouji, it was their first encounter with «The Second», and yet they weren’t afraid—just mildly surprised. This stuff just didn’t register as scary anymore.

All this time, «Heartseed» was their archnemesis. But now it was cooperating with the CRC to defeat a common enemy, and indeed, it was standing shoulder to shoulder with them when they departed for the Isolation Zone. Sure, it had yet to show itself thus far, but they all figured it would turn up eventually. And yet «The Second» turned up instead.

«The Second» was in some way affiliated with the CRC’s

current enemy, «The Third»'s group. But it waffled back and forth between both factions, never committing to one or the other.

"I showed up because... «Heartseed» might not be able to...?"

This shook Taichi to the core. «*Heartseed*» *can't make it?*

"Why wouldn't...?"

He couldn't even finish his question. It was just that unbelievable.

"Don't ask me... It seems like he's dealing with a lot right now...?"

Frankly speaking, a lot of their plans hinged on «Heartseed»'s presence. After all, it was the one who had convinced them to enter the Isolation Zone to see if they could help, and now that they were inside, they needed to discuss their strategy. So where was it?

The rest of the CRC seemed to be just as stunned as he was.

"Without your memories... you change a lot... Almost like the old you dies...?"

Admittedly, a drastic loss of self *could* be compared to death, in a sense.

"...So that happened to «Heartseed»?" Nagase asked in a timid, wavering voice.

"I'm not sure...? But the possibility is there... I guess?"

Was «Heartseed» gone for good? Did «The Third»'s group erase its memories, the way they were apparently planning to? But then, wouldn't that mean that the CRC's memories were wiped, too?

Body-swap, Liberation... Nope, it's all here...

"Hold on a minute. I don't really care what happened to it, but... can we really tackle this thing without it...?"

Even Inaba was starting to panic.

"Who knows...?" Evidently «The Second» had no interest in answering that sort of question.

"But... you're going to help us get a grasp of the situation,

right?”

[Kurihara] nodded. “Yeah... seeing as «Heartseed» asked me to...”

So «Heartseed» sent «The Second»? Was this proof that «Heartseed» sincerely couldn’t show itself for whatever reason?

«The Second» walked a fine line between enemy and friend, and it was unclear how much they could trust it... but right now, they didn’t have a lot of other options. So Inaba launched into a series of rapid-fire questions.

“First, I’d like to ask about the Isolation Zone itself. We can’t leave, we can’t get any kind of signal in or out, and the weather and whatnot is all carefully controlled to be as comfortable as possible. But what are we going to do about food, for example? And for that matter, what’s going on back in the real world? How much time has passed since we left? Are people freaking out about it? Will we make it back safely?”

The seven CRC members sat in their chairs, facing the doorway where «The Second» remained standing. But instead of answering the questions, it started to complain.

“...That’s a lot of questions...? Is this what «Heartseed» has to deal with every time...?”

“Look, are you filling in for «Heartseed» or not?” Inaba pressed.

«The Second»’s body swayed to and fro as it glanced around. Almost like it was visibly waffling between “yes” and “no.” Eventually, the swaying seemed to stop at “yes.”

“You don’t need to worry about... the real world... That’s how this is designed... When you go back... it’ll be the same time it was before...? Oh, and yes... once this is all over, you’ll go back, safe and sound...? You aren’t going to be trapped here permanently... Definitely not...”

“So no time has passed in the real world?” Taichi muttered. He was glad to know that their absence wasn’t causing some mass panic, but at the same time, it felt like a

sign that they were in it for the long haul.

"What else... You can't leave, you can't contact the outside world... Also, you can't get hurt, and you can't die of hunger or dehydration...?"

"How does *that* work...?" Kiriya mumbled in disbelief.

"S-So we're all invincible now?!" Enjouji shouted. "Or... or is this a virtual world in a computer, or...?!"

This reminded Taichi of something else. "Come to think of it, when I first woke up here, I noticed I didn't have a single speck of dirt on me, even though I was sprawled out on the ground. Is getting dirty the same as 'getting hurt' or something?"

"Well... sure, why not...?"

That didn't really sound like an actual yes.

"Alright, so we've established that we don't need to worry about the real world or our biological needs while we're here. We aren't in mortal danger, and once it's all over, we can leave. Right?" Inaba asked.

"Right," «The Second» nodded.

For once, the conversation was actually progressing. «The Second» was always the type to say its piece and leave, but this time it was actually trying to have a dialogue with them.

"So «The Third»'s group is using this place as a... a *petri dish* for their experiment?" Nagase asked, her anger clearly restrained under her stiff expression.

"Yes... There are more than a hundred humans here, and they're all experiencing phenomena in groups of... four? Five? Six?"

"And they're all hypnotized, right? Because there's no way they'd be this calm about it otherwise," Chihiro muttered to himself. "I mean, even *we* were hypnotized at one point. That's why we failed to notice anything weird about the rumors."

"A little bit, but not too much...? After all, there's no point in brainwashing them completely...?" «The Second» replied. "Ideally, you hypnotize them at first, then let it wear off..."

That's kind of what we're doing...? After all, once you accept something as normal... even after the hypnosis is gone, you still tend to think of it as normal... You humans, I mean...?"

Those last few words drew a clear line between «The Second» and the rest of them.

"Oh, and... the rules are the same...? The same as they were in the real world..."

In other words, the only real difference was the number of concurrent experiments.

"If things get dicey, we'll trigger an emergency shutdown... and at the end, we'll undo everything that happened...?"

"Now *that's* the tricky part," Inaba cut in. "When you 'undo everything' with an emergency shutdown, will it erase their memories of their friends in addition to the phenomenon they experienced here?"

"Probably... since it's so sudden...?"

"Well, that's why we came here. To prevent that."

"Plus, we're hoping we can find a way to avoid losing the past eighteen months of our lives," Nagase added.

After all, even after the Isolation Zone came to an end, the threat of the Record Wipe still remained.

"I mean, sure, I've been writing little reminders, and I had Chee-hee and Shino-chan print some stuff out for me so I could use it as wrapping paper, but I'm just not sure it's enough..."

Back in the real world, all they could really do to prepare for the Record Wipe was to create a series of safety nets to help them remember after the fact.

"And don't forget, we want to help Misaki-chan regain her memories of her friends after she lost them back in the real world," Kiriya declared, her eyes burning with determination.

Their goal: to fight for everyone's memories, including their own.

"You've got a lot going on... Sounds complicated... Very

complicated...?” «The Second» commented in an emotionless voice.

“Is there an easy way to get everyone out of here?” Inaba asked, probing for a useful hint. “That’d be the best way to keep them all safe.”

“It’ll all come to an end eventually, you know... Just like in the real world...?” «The Second» replied offhandedly. This wasn’t much of an answer, but at least it hadn’t decided to walk out on them.

“Just a few more questions, alright? We need actual answers... How does «The Third»’s group view us?”

Now there was an important question.

“...For the most part, they view you as... ‘whatever’...? They don’t really care... If anything, you might prove interesting...? But if you start spreading unnecessary information... they might start to keep an eye on you...? The usual info is okay, though...”

So the enemy was aware of their movements. This put Taichi on edge. But according to «The Second», they would be fine as long as they didn’t cross any red lines. Not too different from the warning «Heartseed» had originally given them back in the real world. Unfortunately, while it was good to know they weren’t completely powerless, this restriction still felt limiting.

“Unnecessary information, huh? So what you’re saying is, don’t tell them the stuff only we know about? Stuff that would make the ‘experiment’ less interesting?”

“Yes... Exactly...? Controlling the flow of information is... an important part of the process...”

Then Enjouji of all people joined the fray. “O-Okay, so... for example... what if we warned people to stay calm so they wouldn’t t-trigger an emergency shutdown...?”

“Noooo, no, no... That’s no good...? We haven’t told them about the emergency shutdown...”

Evidently it was a good move to ask in terms of concrete examples.

“So if you can avoid stuff like that... you should be fine...? Unless they change their views...?”

“The second they change their minds about us, we’re kind of screwed,” Taichi muttered under his breath. One thing was for certain: «The Third» had them in the palm of its hand, and they were fighting this battle at a massive disadvantage.

“One last question: we’ve noticed some people vanishing into thin air. Is that one of the phenomena?” Nagase asked. She was referring to the two first-year boys—and if Kurihara could be believed, Oosawa Misaki as well.

“That’s the emergency shutdown...?” «The Second» replied without batting a lash.

Everyone froze.

As much as Taichi would have liked to react with anger or grief, it just... didn’t feel real. He couldn’t conjure an emotional response.

Once «The Third»’s group decided the risk to a given participant was too great, they used the emergency shutdown to flush the victim’s memories without stopping to make any fine adjustments... and then the victim was ejected from the Isolation Zone?

In other words, they had already lost people. And those people had already lost their friendships.

It was apparent that the rules of the emergency shutdown still applied here: whenever there was extreme emotional instability, a mental breakdown, or any other “scandal,” it would trigger. But whenever they tried to ask for clarification on the boundary between safe and shutdown-worthy, they only got vague responses, like “It depends...?”

Next they asked whether the victims of the shutdown would return to the real world ahead of everyone else, but apparently this was not the case; the return to reality was planned to happen simultaneously for all participants at the end of the Isolation Zone experiment.

“Emotional instability... So like, if someone uncovered a

secret you really didn't want them to know...?" Kiriyaama murmured.

"And it's probably not a good idea to fight among your friends, either," Enjouji chimed in.

"Yeah... Yeah... Exactly...? It's not a good idea...? Also... heavy emphasis is placed on one's fellow group members, so if something catastrophic happens between them, it's very... unsafe?"

"Fellow group members, huh... Is that really all the info you can give us? Anything that's guaranteed to cause a shutdown? Or anything that would make it harder to trigger one?" Inaba demanded. No matter how much information they gleaned, it just wasn't enough.

"Anything else...? No...? I'm gonna go now...?" «The Second» announced suddenly. *Really* suddenly.

"Wait, but—we still—!"

But «The Second» left Kurihara's body before Taichi could even finish his sentence.



Evidently «The Second»'s possession had done Kurihara some good, because when she regained consciousness, she was a great deal calmer. When she told them she wanted to go back to the rest of her group in the track clubroom, the CRC didn't stop her. Instead, Kiriyaama walked her most of the way there.

They had successfully gotten a grasp of the situation. They couldn't see an immediate solution, but they had confirmed that emotional instability would increase the risk of losing memories through the emergency shutdown. As such, they needed to put some measures in place as soon as possible to account for that.

"We're a small team, and we won't be able to save everyone. But putting out small fires is still better than doing nothing at all," Inaba declared.

Taichi nodded. "First, we should talk to them. That way we can buy ourselves some time to think about our next step."

And so the seven members of the CRC headed to the East Wing, where the classrooms were located. After all, that was where the majority of students had gathered, per Katori's instructions. The first-years were all contained to one room, while the second-years had been divided into three. However, not all of the groups were present and accounted for.

And so the CRC decided to visit each of the classrooms and check on everyone's current condition.

"Oh, and we'll need to follow up with Kurihara and the Liberation boys separately. But when it comes to the topic of the emergency shutdown, take care to tread lightly," Inaba explained.

Indeed, people who had already witnessed an emergency shutdown would need to be approached in a different fashion. They didn't know whether «The Third»'s group was consciously aware of this, but the emergency shutdown was in fact the biggest threat to the humans' side.

As they walked through the first floor of the main building, someone called out to them.

"Hey, CRC! What are you folks up to?"

It was President Katori, accompanied by his subordinates in the student council.

It would appear that the student council had planned a classroom tour of their very own—in which case, it was clearly more efficient for both groups to work together. The CRC offered to assist them, and Katori readily agreed.

"This'll be a huge help. The more hands on deck, the better," said vice president Sasaki, a somewhat high-strung boy who wore glasses.

After a brief discussion, their combined group of fifteen was split into four teams, each tasked with visiting a corresponding classroom. Taichi was put on a team with Sasaki, Kiriama, and Adachi, the first-year from the

outreach committee, to visit one of the second-year classrooms.

“So the student council’s going to do most of the talking, and the CRC will just fill in here and there... right?”

That was Katori’s plan, at least. He was seemingly fixated on making sure the student council was calling the shots, and Inaba had accepted it with a shrug.

“That’s what the President was saying, but... I’m not opposed to you taking center stage if the need arises.” Apparently Sasaki wasn’t eager to hog the spotlight.

“Mmm... I think they’d probably rather listen to someone in the student council. Like, it’d be kinda weird if *we* were the ones taking charge. Right?” Kiriya looked over at Adachi for confirmation.

“For sure, dude. I think so, too,” Adachi answered cheerfully. Her sporadic use of slang gave her a tomboy aesthetic. But as a first-year, Taichi couldn’t imagine her speaking confidently to a room full of upperclassmen.

“I mean, I’m willing to do it. I can handle it. Nngh... If only the President could take care of it all himself... That was the original plan, you know,” Sasaki muttered anxiously. He and Adachi walked into the classroom, followed by Taichi and Kiriya.

Inside, thirty-plus second-year students had gathered.

“Oh, it’s Yaegashi!” called Watase Shingo.

“And Kiriya-san!” Miyagami added.

Naturally, since this was Classroom 2-B, a lot of Taichi’s fellow classmates were present. They had split off into six clusters—some all-guy groups, some all-girl groups, and some a mix of the two. Some were sitting in chairs or on desks, while others were standing.

At first glance, it looked like any other break period between classes. But there was a firm divide between each cluster, and the way they all whipped around at the sudden presence of outsiders made it obvious that there was an undercurrent of tension beneath the peaceful veneer.

"Hey, how's it going? Is the student council in charge now or something?" one of the students called to them.

"W-We're here to explain all that."

Standing at the teacher's podium, the vice president stammered through a regurgitation of the same speech the president had made in the gym. *Stay calm. Hang in there. We'll handle everything.*

Taichi and Kiriya were standing at the front of the room alongside him, but they were shunted to the side.

Then people spoke up from the crowd:

"...I mean, I don't have a problem cooperating with you guys..."

"But what are we supposed to *do*, exactly? And what's the student council's plan?"

"Well... we haven't gotten quite that far yet. B-But for now, we'd like to gather feedback from everyone."

"What *feedback*? We want to go home! End of story!"

"Do you even *have* a plan?"

This attempt to unite everyone had only resulted in criticism. Perfectly justified, in Taichi's opinion. No one was at fault here; they were all frustrated with the current circumstances, and they needed to vent about it sooner or later.

"I mean, what even *are* these phenomena? Obviously I can live with it, but this can't be normal!" Watase shouted.

"Has the student council learned anything?" Ishikawa asked.

These two were close friends of Taichi's, and he knew them to be patient, laid-back guys. Sure enough, there was no anger in their voices, but at this point it was clear they weren't going to tiptoe around the student council's feelings.

"Uh... well..."

The complaints were steadily snowballing out of control, and Taichi got the sense it was a good time for him to step in. "Let's all stay calm. Panicking won't help us," he called.

Instantly, all eyes turned to him. He nearly flinched back, but managed to hold his ground.

"I understand how you feel. We all want to whine and complain. But you have to remember, we're all in the dark here. We gotta have compassion for each other."

"We can't start fighting with each other. We need to respect the people around us!" Kiriya added.

"Yaegashi-kun... Yui-chan..." Setouchi murmured in surprise.

"They're kinda badass when they take charge," Nakayama remarked.

"It's crazy how they can keep a level head right now," Watase nodded, impressed.

"Perhaps I ought to take a leaf out of their book," Ishikawa mused.

"Dude, what are you talking about? You're so calm, you're practically a monk!"

"You're just saying that because I have a shaved head..."

It was easy to see they'd made a positive impact on the room, if a modest one. As tempted as Taichi was to keep going, Inaba had instructed them that it was too early to talk about their past experiences with the phenomena. They were outsiders here, and it was too soon to tell just how far they were permitted to intrude.

"If you need someone to talk to about your worries or complaints, we're more than happy to hear you out," Taichi proposed.

"You're a saint, Yaegashi! No wonder you have a girlfriend! ...Ugh, I don't want to think about my love life right now... But I know you're a good listener, Yaegashi! I'm gonna take you up on that!" Miyagami shouted, flailing his arms dramatically as his carefully styled hair bounced all over the place. "See, I'm in a group with Sone and Mori and Kubo, and our phenomenon involves feeling each other's feelings! The heck is that about, man?!"

And so Miyagami began his somewhat flustered

explanation of the Sentiment Transmission.

"All of a sudden I hear these **[voices]** in my head, and then I feel whatever emotion they're feeling! And I have no idea when it'll strike, so I have to be on guard literally at all times!"

"Miyagami-kun, I know it's stressful, but you have to stay calm, okay?"

"Yes, of course! Anything you say, Kiriya-san!" Despite his antics, he was rather quick to change his tune.

"Man, I hate being in the same group as Miyagami. Anyone wanna trade?"

"I could say the same about you, Sone! The one time I get to read people's minds, and there's no girls! Ugh!"

Setouchi shot him a withering look. "That's kind of creepy, Miyagami-kun."

"No, I was... just joking... Ngh..."

"Oh my god, relax! I was just messing around with you!"

"O-Oh... Right, of course! I should've realized. Also, for the record, Sone was just thinking 'Setouchi's so scary! You can tell she used to be a bad kid!'"

"*Miyagami!* It's not cool to blab, man!"

"Is that so, Sone-kun...?"

"W-Well, um... I, uh, I was also joking, you see..."

The mood in the room had lightened considerably, to the point that the students were starting to make jokes about their phenomena.

"Yui! Yaegashi! Can I borrow you?"

Right as Taichi and the others filed out of the classroom to meet up with the rest of the CRC and student council, someone stopped them in the hall. It was Kurihara Yukina.

"I'll go ahead and meet up with the rest of the group," said Sasaki.

"Ditto," said Adachi.

And so the council members walked off, leaving Taichi and Kiriya behind. They'd already been planning to speak

with Kurihara separately, so this worked out perfectly.

"I came in near the tail end of your discussion back there," she explained.

"You were in the room?" Kiriyaama blinked in surprise. Taichi hadn't noticed her, either.

"Everyone sounded like they were having a lot of fun, despite the circumstances. Kind of crazy, don't you think? It's crazy. Or are we crazy? No, no, that can't be it."

There was a strange glint in Kurihara's eyes as she spoke. Why was she acting this way? Perhaps those who had experienced the phenomena back in the real world were immune to the hypnosis cast on everyone else. Or... maybe the body-swap had simply taken its toll on her mental health.

"Say, Kurihara... Where's the rest of the track team?"

"You mean Akemi and the rest of the body-swap group? They've holed up somewhere else. They're having a hard time believing this is really happening."

"Maybe that's why they wouldn't let me into their clubroom," Kiriyaama murmured. She had recently attempted to visit, only to be turned away.

"Yep. They don't want to talk to anyone," Kurihara declared flat-out.

They had locked themselves away and shut everyone else out.

"Then they probably weren't in the gym for roll call, either..." Granted, this was not the most pressing concern, but Taichi couldn't help but worry that the headcount was inaccurate.

"Don't worry. I wrote all their names down myself," Kurihara explained. It seemed like she was still thinking clearly, and yet something about her felt... fragile.

"You guys have been through this phenomenon stuff before, right? Was it ever like this?"

"N-No...? It was always just the five of us, and like, we were never brought to some isolated space," said Kiriyaama.

"Hmmm..."

"What's on your mind?" Taichi asked.

"Just wondering, but while you were in there, did you tell them about your past experience with the phenomena?"

"Well... no... Listen, Kurihara, we'd like to keep that quiet for now. We want to make sure the timing is right before we tell everyone."

"Okay then. I won't go spreading it around."

The look in her eyes was painfully intense. Almost like she was glaring at them.

"Yukina, relax! You're really scaring me, okay? N-Not that I'm scared *of* you! I'm just... scared *for* you."

"Oh, and the first-year boys who vanished—there's a connection between them and Misaki, right?"

They couldn't discuss the emergency shutdown if they wanted to avoid drawing «The Third»'s attention. It was too risky.

"Well?"

"There... might be," said Taichi. "All three of them have one important thing in common: they first experienced the phenomena back in the real world."

"Wait, what? So we weren't the only group dealing with a phenomenon back in the real world?"

Oh, right. He'd forgotten that they hadn't informed Kurihara of that little detail.

"We're looking into it right now. Until we figure it out, please don't talk to anyone about this, either."

He didn't enjoy making these demands of her. Both the track team and the first-year boys were clearly struggling with their phenomena, possibly due to how long they had been subjected to it. And if so, the next few days spent here in the Isolation Zone would surely have a similar effect on the dozens of other groups trapped here...

"Hmmm... What about you, Yui? Would you say the same thing?"

"Huh? Uh... yeah...?"

Kurihara scrutinized each of them in turn.
“Alright then.”



Ideally they would’ve liked to meet with the rest of the track team in person, but Kurihara staunchly refused, so they were forced to let it go. She told them she’d pass the message along to the others, so for the time being, their only option was to let her handle it.

The next topic of discussion: what to do about the Liberation group. When the subject came up, Chihiro and Enjouji volunteered to go talk to them. They asked the boys to stay quiet about certain details—how long they’d endured their phenomenon, the CRC’s past experiences, and the vanishing act—then met back up with the rest of the club. Chihiro and Enjouji had maintained regular check-ins with the Liberation group since they were back in the real world, and they seemed to feel it was their sworn duty to look out for them.

Before long, the student council moved into their next phase. Yet again, Katori’s voice boomed over the schoolwide intercom system: “Everybody gather up in the gym so we can hand out food and blankets.”

Current time: 9:30.

It certainly *felt* like time was passing at the same speed as in real life, judging from the clocks. There was no time discrepancy on their cell phones, either.

“The moon’s definitely moving across the sky,” Enjouji mused quietly as they walked down the hall. Would the sun eventually rise?

“The resources are located in the storage room. Single file, everyone! Stay calm and follow instructions,” Katori stated into the microphone on stage.

But there was no visible panic in the crowd. Everyone was listening and following orders; at this point, it really felt like

they were refugees displaced by some natural disaster.

As for the CRC, they assisted the student council in controlling the flow of traffic to the storage area, where the emergency supplies were kept, as well as the distribution of such supplies. Taichi in particular was tasked with standing at the intersection of the hallway and pointing the students in the correct direction. But since there wasn't much for him to do besides... well... point and say "This way," he overheard a fair bit of conversation.

"So there's food, huh? Is there really enough for more than a hundred people?"

"Dude, Yamaboshi's big enough for a *thousand* students. They've gotta have enough."

"I don't really... *feel* hungry, though..."

"Yeah, me either. But I don't feel full, either... Y'know, something tells me we don't really *need* to eat."

"I'm still gonna, though."

It seemed that the students could somehow tell that they wouldn't need food to survive.

As another group approached, someone called out to Taichi: "You're really working hard! I'm impressed!"

It was Shiroyama from the jazz band. Back during their first year, they were in the same class. He was mild-mannered and amiable, and because of that, some people referred to him as "Little Prince," often sarcastically. In the past he had attempted to confess his feelings to Nagase, but these days he seemed to be in a happy relationship with Setouchi.

"Seriously, it's incredible that you're able to work at a time like this. I mean, it seems like the student council thinks it's their job to take charge, but you CRC folks are sorta like volunteer workers, right?"

"No, no, it's not like that..." Taichi attempted to think of a better way to explain it, but came up empty-handed.

"You're a burden!" a hoarse voice shouted in the distance.

Taichi turned his head and saw that Shiroyama's group

had come to a stop a few meters down the hall, beneath the flickering fluorescent lights.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?!"

"Uh... I didn't mean that. It was the phenomenon, I swear."

"I bet you're just using the phenomenon as a get out of jail free card so you can talk smack about the rest of us!"

"I told you, that's not it at all!"

Taichi dashed over to the bickering students. "What's going on?"

"...Mind your own business," said the guy.

"It's nothing," said the girl.

And they both promptly walked off.

"Sorry about them... They're both in my phenomenon group," Shiroyama explained, hanging his head with a guilty expression on his face. Indeed, Taichi recognized them as fellow members of the jazz band, so it made sense that Shiroyama was grouped with them.

"See, there are times where we're jinxed to tell lies and say stuff we don't mean."

"Can't you just wait until it's over and then explain to everyone that it was the phenomenon?" Taichi suggested.

"I mean, we do. But it doesn't change the fact that we said it in the first place, and there's no way to prove it was actually the phenomenon, so... I don't know. It's just complicated."

As he spoke, Taichi realized that, in a way, every phenomenon was engineered to inflict a special kind of suffering that only its victims could understand. And in an isolated environment in which they were forced to be around each other at all hours of the day, what an outsider saw as a tiny fracture might in fact sow the seeds of a wider gulf.

"When is this whole thing going to end? Because I don't think I can handle it for much longer."

Taichi didn't have the answer... but he could only hope that this comment wasn't a prelude to a stormy future.

While they knew they didn't actually need to eat, at the same time, it felt unnatural not to. And so Taichi and the others ate their emergency ration biscuits and washed them down with bottled water. By normal standards, it was bedtime. And since the student council had handed out blankets to everyone, most people seemed prepared to hunker down for the night. They never once questioned whether tomorrow would come.

The student council had proposed that they all gather together to sleep, but many of the students were opposed to this idea. Instead, most of the groups split off and found their own rooms to sleep in, with mixed-gender groups splitting up further. With 118 students accounted for, that meant there were roughly 24 different phenomenon groups, but factoring in all the classrooms and clubrooms, Yamaboshi had plenty of space to accommodate everyone.

Over time the chatter faded, and the lights clicked off, one by one. There was no sign of the student council, either. The whole school had turned in for the night.

Naturally, the CRC had chosen to sleep in Rec Hall Room 401.

"Normally I'd *totally* be whining about not being able to shower, but I actually don't feel gross at all," Kiriya commented, absently touching her hair and forehead.

"I... I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep," Enjouji murmured anxiously. "Not without my favorite pillow."

"Relax, Shino," Inaba replied. "I get the feeling we won't have to worry about sleep deprivation while we're here."

Taichi could feel it, too. While he *did* feel vaguely sleepy, the desire was faint; if he wanted to, he could probably manage without sleep just fine.

"It's the perfect world!" Nagase shouted as she flopped down onto a blanket spread out on the floor. "Weird... The floor's firm, but not enough to hurt my back."

"Apparently we don't have to worry about any bodily

inconvenience whatsoever,” Chihiro remarked.

“The perfect petri dish for an experiment. All the unnecessary variables have been pruned away,” Inaba mused. “But that actually makes things a hell of a lot easier on us, too. It’s a load off our shoulders. All we have to focus on is the mental health of everyone here.”

Perhaps that was the best way to look at it. That way they could concentrate on the battle ahead.



When Taichi next awoke, the first thing he saw was a stark white ceiling. This was not his bedroom.

At first he was confused, but then he remembered. He was inside the Isolation Zone.

The clubroom didn’t have any nightlights; the only source of light was through the window, where the glow of the city streamed in. Fortunately, this was enough illumination to avoid stepping on anyone.

“...Taichi?” Inaba sat up, rubbing her eyes.

“Sorry... Did I wake you?”

“Nah, I was already up.”

For propriety’s sake, the CRC had split the clubroom into the “boys’ side” and the “girls’ side” for the night. But it was a small room, so there was only about a meter’s worth of space between them. (Not that they were all that worried about any funny business taking place.)

“This is one hell of a situation we’ve landed ourselves in, isn’t it? Just a few hours ago, we were back in the real world... Well, I guess time passes differently in here, so maybe my senses are off,” Inaba added hastily. “But to me, it feels like a few hours ago.”

“If anything, it feels like *forever* ago,” Taichi replied.

Back when they first met «Heartseed», he could feel that their lives had taken a turn for the supernatural. But never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that it would one day

lead them to an alternate reality. In that sense, it really felt like the ultimate trial. This was the story's final act.

"First, we found out that there were phenomena happening to other people at school. Then we learned that our memories were going to be rewritten. Then we noticed the rumors floating around... and then a hundred students were spirited away."

The mere act of listening to Inaba recount the order of events was enough to make his head spin. "But we chose to come here of our own free will."

All the rest of it was beyond their control, but not this.

"Hmph. Yeah, we chose this path. We wanted to do this, so here we are. Although it's one hell of a detour, considering we're supposed to be focusing on the Record Wipe."

Here, they were fighting to protect other people's friendships, as well as the memories that took place while the CRC were inflicted with their various phenomena. In that sense, this was still a battle against the Record Wipe.

"But nevertheless, we'll forge ahead." Inaba glanced out the window, up at the shining moon. Then she looked back at him. "I'll be honest with you, Taichi... I'm scared."

As her boyfriend, it was his job to be there for her.

"I'll protect you."

Alone they were powerless, but if they all worked together, surely—

The next morning, the population of the Isolation Zone had decreased.



Chapter 3: Opposition

The next morning, Taichi awoke feeling perfectly fine. No fatigue, no hunger. And although he'd slept in his school uniform, his shirt wasn't wrinkled in the slightest.

At 7:00 AM, student council president Katori Jouji made an intercom announcement:

"Is everyone awake? Get ready for the day, then come meet me in the gym. I'd like to pass out more food rations and, if possible, take roll."

And so the CRC headed to the gym.

Here in the Isolation Zone, the sun had risen. The sky was cloudy, but it wasn't so cold as to be unpleasant. They entered the gym to find that a lot of people had turned up in just their uniforms. They didn't feel the need to wear their overcoats.

And yet the air felt chilly for a distinctly different reason...

"We want to go home! You guys said you were going to figure it out!" one of the male students shouted at Katori while the rest of the crowd watched from a safe distance.

"Yes, I know. We all want to get home as soon as possible. But right now—"

"Are you even *trying*?! Why are you handing out *rations*?! Are you planning to make us live here?! Screw that, man! I'm not gonna... I'm not gonna live with this phenomenon crap forever!"

"Alright, let's talk. Come on." Accompanied by the rest of the student council, Katori led the male student out of the gym.

"...Was that Kubozuka?" Aoki blinked. The two were fellow classmates.

"Oh, hi, Aoki-kun..."

"Aoki..."

"Oh, heyyyy! It's Matsui-san and Katsuragi! So, uh... you guys going after him? Your group's got the 'everybody's an enemy' phenomenon, right?"

"Yeah... We've been trying to look out for him, but..."

"But then he goes and flips out on the President!"

"Yesterday the phenomenon struck him more than anyone else, remember? The dude's probably stressed out... Let me tag along."

"Thank you, Aoki. That'd be a huge help."

"Whenever there's trouble, I'm your guy!" And so Aoki and his other classmates followed the student council out of the gym.

There was a moment of silence, and then murmurs erupted throughout the room, loud enough for the CRC to overhear.

"...Right? If we can't get out of here, we're stuck with the phenomenon forever!"

"I... I'm sure it'll be okay! We'll be free to leave eventually... Yeah, and then the phenomenon will come to an end..."

Everyone seemed to believe that the phenomena came part and parcel with the Isolation Zone. That escaping would free them from all things supernatural. And they weren't exactly wrong about that. More worryingly, however, fear and frustration were on the rise. Almost like something had changed overnight.

"Gooooood *morning*, ladies and bros! What's going on in here? Everything groovy?" asked Adachi, the first-year outreach committee member.

"You know, for a first-year, you've got a good head on your shoulders," Taichi commented.

"Well, I can't exactly slack off, now can I? The outreach committee is still part of the student council, y'know." She patted the band on her left arm.

That said, she wasn't the only one who was managing to keep a level head; plenty of students in the crowd were still hanging in there. So what was it that differentiated the angry ones from the calm ones? Was it the degree of hypnosis cast on them? Or the varying mental stress of the different phenomena?

Probably the latter, if Taichi had to guess. All of them were walking on very thin ice. One wrong move and they might break down.

"I'd like to start taking roll... What's the CRC's phenomenon again? Reading each other's minds, wasn't it?"

Such was the lie fabricated by the CRC themselves. But they needed a cover story in order to blend in, and something like "reading minds" would conveniently explain why their phenomenon wasn't outwardly visible.

"Yes, that. Oh, and for the record, Aoki just stepped outside," Inaba nodded.

"Uhhh... Hmm, that's odd. Uwa-kun and Enjouji-san don't appear to be with you."

"Whoa, you're right! Shino-chaaaaan! Chee-heeeee! Where are youuuu?" Nagase called, glancing around the gym. Likewise, Taichi started looking around, too.

Then the two CRC first-years came running up in a fluster.

"How the hell did you two idiots get lost?"

"W-We didn't get *lost*, Inaba-senpai! We were waved over by some friends... Oh, but forget about that! Over there! There's a problem with the roll call!"

"What kind of problem?"

"It's the second-year rugby group. Last night, one of their members... Well... See, they got into a fight about their phenomenon, and one of their members walked out, and he hasn't been back."

"Y-Yes! Exactly what Chihiro-kun said! And worst of all... Before he left, he was acting like he didn't even know them!"

As of that morning, three people had seemingly vanished. Adding them to the two Liberation boys, plus Oosawa Misaki, the total number of missing students was up to six.

As much as they didn't want to admit it... those six people were all probably victims of an emergency shutdown.

But over the course of the roll call, there were dozens of no-shows, with their fellow group members standing in for them instead. Supposedly those absent students were still on campus somewhere. But because of this, it was hard to tell how many people were *actually* missing.

Thus far, neither Kurihara nor the remaining two Liberation boys had reported their missing group members to the student council. They didn't want to accept that their friends were gone. The CRC had warned them to keep quiet about it just in case, but it was clear that none of them had any intention of making a scene about it. Instead, they were all choosing to wait and see.

But since the student council was taking roll, naturally, this discrepancy was quickly uncovered.

"What's going on here? Did they all have a falling-out and break away from their groups? Would all these people really be that childish at a time like this?" Katori demanded.

The student council and CRC had gathered backstage to review the roll call. At first Katori had seemed opposed to the CRC's presence, but once they revealed that they already knew about the disappearances, he reluctantly let them join. It was apparent that he didn't want too many people to know about it just yet.

"Did they really just... *vanish*?"

"Wouldn't that mean they found a way out?" vice president Sasaki suggested suddenly.

"A way out...?"

Of course, the CRC knew that it was actually the worst-case scenario. But to everyone else, it seemed like a ray of hope. Taichi could understand that, of course. If they weren't *here*, why, one would assume they must have gone back to

the real world...

"I don't know. This whole 'people vanishing' thing gives me bad vibes," Inaba remarked, possibly in an attempt to change their minds.

"What makes you say that?" asked Fujishima Maiko.

"Well, it sounds like everyone who disappeared was in a bad headspace at the time, right? Are you telling me the only way out is to start fights with your friends? It just doesn't feel right. It seems... backwards."

"Ah, I see. So you view the situation as a game with its own set of rules. Honestly, given the circumstances, I doubt our logic even applies here."

This viewpoint was hard to argue against, further complicated by Fujishima's long-standing suspicions toward the CRC. That said, perhaps the Isolation Zone truly *was* little more than a game. Surely «The Third» and its ilk saw it that way, at least.

"Let's not let our imaginations get carried away, shall we? Now that we know people are missing, the first thing we should do is look for them."

And so, at Katori's command, the student council leapt into action.

As for the CRC, they returned to Rec Hall Room 401 for a private discussion of their own.

"Is it really *that* easy to trigger an emergency shutdown?" Taichi lamented quietly. If so, the situation was even worse than they had imagined.

"And when it happens, they lose *everything*... All their memories of the friends who suffered the phenomenon with them, just... *gone*," Kiriya chimed in miserably.

"If only there was some way to f-fix it," Enjouji whimpered. "The way things are, I feel so bad for Kanda-kun and Horiguchi-kun... not to mention the friends they've left behind..."

"Well then, we need to think of a plan," Chihiro offered.

“Holy crap! Chee-hee just said something *optimistic* for once! Guys, we gotta make it happen!”

“If that’s supposed to be a joke, it’s not funny, Nagase-san.”

“...Okay, you’re right. Just trying to lighten the mood. I’m sorry.”

“But all we can really do is try to prevent any more emergency shutdowns, right?” Aoki asked, steering the conversation back on track. “Because I gotta say, it really sucks not being able to explain it. When I was talking to Kubozuka, all I could really say was ‘relax’ and ‘hang in there.’”

“If «The Second» is to be believed, we can’t risk talking about it whatsoever,” Inaba replied with a grimace.

“Goddamn it... We can’t afford to keep playing it safe. We have to make a dramatic impact. But how can we help them avoid emergency shutdowns without ever explaining them...?”

“What if we went around and told them, like, ‘These phenomena are no big deal! You’ll be fine!’ or something?” Nagase suggested. This was the strategy the CRC themselves adopted during their own phenomena.

“But we already tried that with Yukina’s group,” Kiriya muttered, staring at the floor.

Indeed, staying calm during a supernatural event was easier said than done. It would only last for so long before things started to fall apart.

“Could we manage all their issues if we split the work between us?” Taichi asked.

Right this minute, there were dozens of students potentially on the verge of an emergency shutdown... but it simply wasn’t realistic for a handful of people to be able to manage a population of more than a hundred.

“You really think we can steal Katori’s thunder and lead these people ourselves? Would «The Third» even let us get away with it? How would we even go about it?” Inaba asked.

She obviously didn't see it working out, and for good reason. Just on its face, the strategy was too reckless. They had neither the information nor the tools necessary to take on such an overwhelmingly powerful opponent. They had the will, but not the means. And they knew full well that intentions weren't enough to make their vision a reality. Life was never that easy.

Perhaps this was always a battle they were destined to lose. Perhaps all that they had worked so long and hard to build would inevitably be stolen away from them, one by one. The world as they knew it would vanish. A mere seven people was simply not enough to keep everything from falling apart—

Just then, they heard the light *thwack* of something colliding with glass.

At first Taichi thought maybe someone had thrown a rock at their window, but... their clubroom was on the *fourth floor*.

Judging from the way everyone stopped and looked around at each other, it wasn't a figment of his imagination, either.

"The heck is goin' on?" Aoki mused aloud. He rose to his feet, walked over to the window, unlocked it, and opened it up.

"W-Wait! Be careful, you idiot!" Kiriyama blurted hastily as her boyfriend stuck his head out.

"I know! I'm being careful! Let's see... Nope, I don't see anyone outside. Not that I was expecting to." He straightened back up and turned to face the others. "I guess we were just—"

But a split-second later, the window behind him went dark as a shadow streaked across it.

Then, slowly but surely, the unidentified entity crawled up, put their foot on the window frame, and stepped into the room.

It was the first grown adult they'd seen since they arrived in the Isolation Zone—Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor for Class 2-B

and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club. But his shoulders were slumped, and his eyes were lifeless... Somewhat similar to «The Second» or «The Third», but not quite the same...

There was no doubt about it. It was «Heartseed».

The entire room was rendered speechless.

Then it spoke, in its usual lethargic tone:

“Oh... What seems to be the problem, everyone...? Surely by now you ought to be used to me... turning up spontaneously...”

No one said a word.

“No, really, what’s the matter...? We’re wasting time... Time I don’t have...”

“Wh-... Why in the ever-loving FUCK did you come in through the WINDOW?! You nearly gave us all a goddamn heart attack, you asshat!” Inaba screeched, flustered.

“Aagh! Jeez, man! The heck did you come from?!” Aoki yelped.

“Is... Isn’t this the fourth floor?! The *fourth floor*?! This is the fourth floor! The *fourth floor*!” Kiriya shrieked.

“Clearly «Heartseed» is a *fourth* to be reckoned with!” Nagase shouted.

“This is *not* the time for your puns, Nagase-san,” Chihiro retorted.

“I think that shocked me so much that I actually looped back around to calm again,” Taichi commented idly.

“Wh-What are you doing here, «Heartseed»-san?! Didn’t you die?! Are you a ghost?!”

“...That really stings, Enjouji-san...”

“O-Oh... Sorry...”

Evidently «Heartseed» was even willing to play along with Enjouji’s banter.

Inaba took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Okay... How did you do that?”

“Gah! And why am I still standing next to you?!” Aoki hurried back over to the table with the rest of the club.

"I mean... I simply hopped down from the roof... and used the window frame as a foothold..."

"What are you, the guy from *Mission Impossible*?!"

"Well... «The Third»'s group is keeping close watch... and I needed to avoid detection... You see... I'm not technically supposed to be here..."

The lighthearted mood in the room was quickly overcome with tension. There was no time to celebrate the arrival of their tentative ally.

"You're not?" Inaba asked.

"Of course not... Obviously... They have no use for me..."

Indeed, «The Third»'s group didn't stand to gain anything from «Heartseed»'s presence here. Not that Taichi could think of, at least.

"But nevertheless... with assistance from «The Second»... I've been pulling some strings..."

Which meant that «The Second» was in fact cooperating with their side.

"Oh, but... I don't have much time... Is it alright if I make this quick...?"

Even the ever-sluggish «Heartseed» seemed to be in a rush.

"You must really be pressed for time. Alright then, hurry it up. What is it you want to tell us? Because frankly, you were supposed to help us figure out what we're meant to be doing in here! Remember?"

"...Oh, Inaba-san... You're never one to beat around the bush... Yes, I came here to pass along some very important information... After all, you would be sitting ducks without me..."

"I'd almost rather die than agree with that, but... we really need you, «Heartseed». Please," Nagase pressed, holding back her emotions through gritted teeth.

"Well then... Since Nagase-san has asked so nicely... I'd better do my very best..."

Why did it feel like «Heartseed» was actually a friend?

“For now... you have two objectives, correct...? To protect the memories of all those held here... and to protect your own.”

“*And* to restore all memories erased by the emergency shutdown!” Kiriya added aggressively, but «Heartseed» ignored her.

“Anyway... The best way to avoid memory loss is simply to avoid an emergency shutdown altogether... Other than that, as «The Second» explained, the rules are fundamentally the same... Should a given subject make it through to the very end, they will only lose those memories which directly pertain to the phenomenon itself...”

So «The Second» was telling the truth about that too.

“Now then... As for your... or should I say, *our*... memories... Or should I call them Records...? I must say, I really struggled with this one...”

“Normally I wouldn’t give a shit about your ‘struggle,’ but... just this once, I actually appreciate it. Thanks for the hard work.”

“Oh my... Inaba-san has thanked me... I’m not worthy... Oh, but fair warning... It appears you will all need to put in a great deal of effort this time around...”

“Bring it on! We can handle it!” Aoki declared enthusiastically.

Personally, Taichi was in agreement. After all, some things were worth it.

“...Because the Isolation Zone can be considered a phenomenon in its own right... the same rules apply... If the experiment is no longer interesting... or becomes too dangerous to continue... or, in this case, if there are too many emergency shutdowns... it will come to an end...”

“H-How many is ‘too many’?” Enjouji asked.

“...It is their call to make, so it’s hard to say... More than a few, at the very least...”

This was too vague to be of much comfort.

“When the experiment ends, the phenomena-centric

memories will be erased... the subjects will be returned to your world... and then the eight of us will lose our Records as well... But I have a plan... that will be set into motion once we leave the Isolation Zone... If it works, and we evade the Record Wipe... we will all be able to keep our memories..."

"And that includes the memories of what happened during each of our phenomena, right? So the connections we've built with the people around us will stay intact?" asked Inaba.

"Yes... That's right..."

"Then that's perfect. Let's give it a try. Is there anything we need to do to prepare?"

"...I see Inaba-san's intuition is as sharp as her tongue... Yes, I must assign to you a very important task... If you are successful, my entire plan will be successful... and if you fail, we are all doomed..."

"Oh, spare us the theatrics," Chihiro retorted, and Taichi was inclined to agree.

"...You see... what I want you to do... is bring this world to an end..."

"*What?* How the heck—?"

"Hold it, lori. So basically... you want us to make the experiment really boring? Is that it?"

"Precisely... and you can do so... by uniting everyone within it... If everyone inside the Isolation Zone falls into perfect harmony... the experiment will end."

"Uniting everyone...?" Enjouji repeated.

"Perfect harmony..." Chihiro murmured.

That's way too vague, Taichi thought to himself. But at the same time, somewhere deep down, it made sense.

"After all, I usually end my own experiments... whenever my subjects are all on the same page... because it's clear to me that nothing more will come of it... although there have been exceptions..."

Was «Heartseed» talking about its experience with the CRC?

“So it’s less interesting to you when everyone’s united...? How come? Not enough drama?” Nagase asked, cocking her head.

“Without any changes of heart, it’s simply no fun...”

That, above all else, was what «they» wanted to see.

“Human emotions have... immense power... More than you may realize... And when the entire group is aligned, they can wield that power... That is how we can disrupt the Isolation Zone...”

“So what you’re saying is, we take each five-person group, get those five people on the same page, and they’ll be freed? Rinse and repeat?” asked Inaba.

“No... The entire Isolation Zone is, itself, one phenomenon...”

“So... we have to unite everyone in here...?” Taichi asked, dubiously, since the premise sounded ridiculous on paper.

“Yes... In doing so... it will most certainly end the experiment...”

“So you want us to bring everyone together, and after the experiment ends, you’ll take it from there?” Nagase asked probingly.

“If you can act quickly, before it falls apart... in other words, if you can end the experiment before there are too many emergency shutdowns... I’ll do the rest...”

“And then they’ll only lose their memories of the Isolation Zone? Everything else will be retained?” Inaba asked, barely suppressing her obvious excitement.

“...Precisely...”

They couldn’t have asked for a better plan. But there was still one last concern:

“Okay, but like, what about the people who already got shut down?” Kiriya asked in a watery voice.

“...I can’t guarantee anything... but it is possible they may be reverted... especially if only a handful of humans have been ‘shut down’... After all, the goal of mass memory modification is to have as few inconsistencies as possible...”

At this, the blood drained from Kiriyaama's face. "Wait, so... if the rest of us all remember, there's a chance they can remember, too...? Is that what you just said?"

"Indeed... if the rest remember... there is a chance..."

Kiriyaama nodded to herself, seemingly satisfied. Even if they couldn't solve all the problems in one fell swoop, there was still potential to fix things later on.

"Well then, that's exactly what we want. But isn't this almost too perfect? I mean, «The Third»'s group is going all-out with this shit. Do these convenient loopholes really exist? Is it just that easy?"

To Taichi, Inaba had every right to be suspicious. It really did seem too good to be true.

At her questions, «Heartseed» smirked.

"Normally it would be quite difficult... but I have put my life on the line... to set this up so that it's easier..."

It had allegedly risked its life, and yet it almost seemed to be *gloating*.

"After all... this way, you'll all entertain me once again... Isn't that right...?"

They had thought «Heartseed» was outmatched. That they were fighting a losing battle. But they were wrong.

"With such a fascinating scenario laid out before me... why wouldn't I want to make things more interesting...? I thought I'd never get another chance... but it seems I've been given one more wonderful opportunity, right at the very end..."

«Heartseed» smiled, wearing the face of Gotou Ryuuzen. The risk was so high, it couldn't even walk in through the door... and yet it continued to pursue its own goals, right to the bitter end. Its sense of conviction was both despicable and—much as they were loath to admit it—admirable.

"Keh heh heh... You're right. This *is* pretty entertaining," Inaba smirked.

Looking back, it was almost always Inaba who had gone toe to toe with «Heartseed», and it had been a while since

she last let her mischievous side come out to play.

"Frankly, I can't be sure if you're actually telling the truth, because I still think it's a little too perfect. But it sounds like a fun time, so it's a gamble I'm willing to take. You want entertaining? I'll give you entertaining."

She was so aggressive, so provocative, it made his heart race. This was the real Inaba Himeko.

"You started this little story because you said we were 'more fascinating than most.' So we'll finish it off with the most thrilling conclusion you'll ever see. Anyone have any objections?"

"Nope! You're such a badass, Inaban. I wish I was as cool as you!" Nagase exclaimed as she glanced around at the others.

They all nodded, Taichi included.

"Not like we got any better ideas," Aoki shrugged with a goofy grin.

"We're going to win this," Kiriya declared fiercely.
"We're going to make this happen."

"And if we still end up losing our memories, we'll just blame «Heartseed»."

"Chihiro-kun, why is it that you're always so quick to pin the blame on other people? I think that says a lot about who you are as a person."

"You wanna fight, Enjouji? What I'm saying is, «Heartseed» had better pull its weight."

"Maybe we ought to worry about *our own weight* before we go around condescending to all-powerful beings!"

In a way, this argument was proof of the first-years' will to fight.

Taichi looked back at «Heartseed» and met its gaze. Its eyes were barely open, but behind the lethargic veneer... he sensed a tiny pinprick of light.

Could they trust it? He wasn't sure. But if there was a chance of victory—even a tiny chance—then they needed to hunt it down and seize it for themselves. No risk, no reward.

“«Heartseed», I choose to trust you and rise to your challenge. Besides, once we make it through this, who knows... Maybe you'll be closer to human.”

Now that they finally knew what «Heartseed»'s true motivation was, Taichi tossed it out to get a reaction. At last, the tables had turned.

“...You all seem to be... rather committed to this... Yes...”

Once «Heartseed» itself was committed, perhaps they could make their dreams into reality. And so Inaba started digging for info.

“I have a question.”

“I am well and truly out of time now, so... make it quick...”

“Was «The Second» telling us the truth? Or do you need me to go over what it said?”

“No need... Yes, you can trust «The Second»...”

That was a quick answer. It would seem the two entities had formed a strong partnership.

“One more thing. How far are we allowed to go while «The Third» is watching?”

“I imagine you're free to do what you like... After all, «they» consider it part of the fun... But you probably can't discuss the things we've told you directly... like the rules of the emergency shutdown... or the plan to unite the participants... But any information that they would inevitably come across by being in here... is fair game...”

“So we're allowed to be here as long as we don't share any knowledge that would 'skew the results,' like the stuff we learned from you or «The Second»?”

“Yes... If it appears you know too much... they will start to wonder where you got your information... and if they find out your connection to me... it will make things more difficult on my end... Because you see, «The Third»'s group has yet to even *suspect* that we've... formed this alliance...”

“Are we allowed to tell them that we've experienced the phenomena before?” Taichi asked, out of interest.

“Well, you were allowed to back in the real world,

correct...? Therefore, it should be fine here... Anyway, now you have your task..."

With this, «Heartseed» moved away from the window toward the center of the room... but no one tensed up. Then it shuffled past them toward the door.

".....Oh, *now* you can use the door?" Inaba asked after a pause, like she just couldn't help herself. She scowled.

"It's safe for the moment... In order to distract them, I... Oh, right... There's no point in me explaining that to you..."

And with that, «Heartseed» left the way it should have come.

"Well, we have our mission," said Inaba, now that it was gone.

"Now that I think about it, isn't this actually the best way to prevent any emergency shutdowns, too?" Nagase mused. "If we can get everyone to support each other, there won't be any fights or breakdowns."

"But to do that, we'll have to unite the world," Chihiro murmured.

"World peace! Dang, that sounds crazy! Feels like we're superheroes!" Aoki exclaimed gleefully, and Taichi found himself wishing he could be even half as optimistic.

"Maybe we'll be superheroes... or maybe we'll be villains. After all, if we made everyone equally... *furious*, for example... perhaps that would meet «The Third»'s conditions to end the Isolation Zone. Although the peaceful approach that Iori described is certainly more ideal, I'll give you that." Sometimes Inaba's rational analysis could be downright terrifying.

"B-But... can we really do this...? There's more than a hundred people here... and I don't have that many friends," Enjouji murmured anxiously. She was by no means the only person worried about this, however.

"Don't worry. We'll make it happen," Taichi declared. After all, the first step was to make his intentions known.

"Yeah. We can totally do this," Kiriya agreed, gazing at

him.

It wouldn't be easy to bring everyone under one banner. They had already tried it with a mere five people back in the real world, and it hadn't gone well. Now they were looking at the same task times twenty. And since that was the entire population of the Isolation Zone, they were essentially tasked with bringing the *whole world* together.

Distrust. Antipathy. Conflict. These things were all human nature; that much was self-evident. At no point in human history had anyone ever succeeded in eradicating them. Granted, this was not their world... but at the same time, it very much still was.

All they had to do was change that.

"Let's prove to them that humans can band together."

And so the battle began.



The CRC needed to unite everyone within this world, and now they had a plan of action. They would tell everyone to support their friends instead of suspect and snap at them. Teach them that, when put into perspective, the phenomena weren't really that big of a deal at all. Convince them that if they all worked together as one, they could eventually escape the Isolation Zone.

The CRC's chosen objective: to get everyone to come together with an optimistic outlook. After all, everyone seemed convinced that they would be freed eventually, probably as a result of the hypnotherapy. So all the CRC had to do was act as a voice of encouragement and give them a little extra push to hang in there.

Plus, now that they knew it was safe, they were ready to discuss their own past experiences with the phenomena.

And so the CRC decided to be bold and take center stage for once.

First, they split into different teams. Then it was go time. It was now approximately lunchtime, and there were no major developments. At noon the student council had made an announcement offering more food distribution, but they stressed that attendance was purely optional. As such, hardly anyone was headed to the gym.

Their priority was, of course, the vanishing students. Not much time had passed since the reveal this morning, so word of it likely hadn't spread far. The student council had pledged to "investigate"—so what was their plan?

Taichi walked through the quiet school building, accompanied by Uwa Chihiro and Enjouji Shino. Through the clubroom window, they'd seen a handful of students on the athletic field, trying to find a way out. But what was everyone else up to?

No one in the West Wing... No one in the courtyard... Passing through the North Wing, they arrived at the East Wing. Here, the first-year classrooms were located on the first floor.

At long last, they could hear voices. While some groups had chosen to hole up in the comfort of their clubrooms, it appeared a majority of people had continued to gather in their assigned classrooms.

"Maybe we should have had each person in the club speak to their own class," Taichi mused.

"Even then, *someone* was going to need to visit the gym," Chihiro pointed out calmly.

"A-Alright, everyone! Let's get in there!" Enjouji declared enthusiastically. "It'll be fine! They're all first-years like us, and... and we have Taichi-senpai's sexy voice here with us!"

"The rest of me is here, too, you know..."

Chihiro and Enjouji were tasked with speaking to their fellow first-years, with Taichi present as backup if necessary, since he was well-known among the younger students as the former Love Guru. And so the three of them stepped into the room assigned to the first-years by the student council.

The moment they opened the door, all eyes turned to them, and there was a moment of fearful tension. Rough estimate: 20-plus students.

"...What's up? Is this part of the student council thing?" one of the boys called.

"What 'student council thing'?" Chihiro asked.

"Oh, uh... They came and took roll again, and then they told us to always keep an eye on our fellow group members..."

"Interesting. Well, to answer your question, no. This is something different."

The three of them stood at the teacher's podium.

"I don't know if you guys have noticed, but we're in no physical danger here. And I think it's clear that this situation won't last forever," Taichi explained.

"So for the time being, we'd like everyone to work together," Chihiro added.

"Let's all reach out and support each other! Not just our friends, but everybody!" Enjouji exclaimed.

"Uhhh... I mean, I get where you're coming from, and it makes sense, but... why are *you guys* telling us this?"

They had expected this reaction, and they had an answer prepared. All they had to do was say it. But it was still nerve-wracking. Once they played this card, they couldn't masquerade as incidental victims any longer. They would be put under the spotlight, and they would have to be prepared for that.

"The truth is... we've experienced phenomena like these before, back in real life."

At Taichi's words, the room fell silent. Then a fever broke out.

"What?! No way!"

"You've been through this before?!"

"...In real life?!"

"Each time it happened, we banded together as a group, and eventually it came to an end. And although this is our

first time being trapped in one location, I believe this will work the same way,” Taichi explained, careful not to imply that he knew anything about the emergency shutdown or how to end the experiment, lest «The Third» catch on. With this admission, surely the students would be more likely to take them seriously.

The first-years began to talk among themselves.

“Well... if it’s happening now, I guess it’s not *that* much of a stretch to believe that it’s happened before, too...”

“Wait, but... if these phenomena can happen in real life, then does that mean... we’re stuck with our phenomena forever?”

“No, I don’t think so. It seems like the phenomena are specifically restricted to this location somehow. So once we get out of here, I’m pretty sure we’ll be leaving all the supernatural stuff behind.”

He was starting to worry that he was letting too much slip, but thus far, nothing bad had happened.

“If what you’re saying is true...”

“We can probably trust the CRC on this.”

“It’s going to end eventually, so it makes sense that we should support each other in the meantime.”

Evidently the first-years were willing to be optimistic about this... although it didn’t seem like they had really thought it through, but rather, they were jumping at the first ray of hope they came across.

“Yaegashi-san! Are we just supposed to sit here?! There’s, like, literally nothing to do!” shouted a boy named Kimura. Back during the Dream Vision phenomenon, when the love craze was at its peak, Kimura had asked Taichi—a completely unaffiliated party, mind you—to participate in a debate regarding the tennis club. He was by no means a bad kid, but he lacked forethought and boundaries.

“All we ask is that you have consideration for your fellow students. Share information with each other, and if trouble breaks out, try to help smooth things over.”

“Got it! Guess what? Me and Shimono and Tada are all in the same group. Our phenomenon lets us randomly give orders to random subjects!”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s hard to explain with just words... Wait... Did it just happen? Oh my god, what crazy timing! Okay, Yaegashi-san, watch closely. Do a pirouette, Shimono!”

Kimura pointed at a boy with messy hair and glasses, who rose to his feet and did a spin. A beat later, the boy’s face flushed bright red.

“See? That’s how it works! But it has to be something they can do real quick, or else it won’t work.”

Unsurprisingly, Shimono was less than pleased. “The hell did you make me do that for, dipshit?! I’ll kick your ass!”

“C-Come on, man! I needed them to understand, didn’t I? Besides, it was just a little pirouette! And even if I didn’t say it out loud, it still would’ve happened anyway!”

“Damn it, Kimura! We agreed to keep our commands subtle so people wouldn’t notice them!”

Shimono stormed over to Kimura.

“W-Wait! Time out!” The other boy shrank back.

“*No fighting!*” Enjouji shrieked, at a volume usually unheard of for her.

Everyone turned to look at her, and for a moment she shrank back... but persisted nonetheless.

“We... We shouldn’t fight each other.”

“But he—”

Thankfully, Chihiro came to the rescue. “She’s right, Shimono. We all know Kimura’s a dumbass. Sometimes you have to just let it go.”

“Hey, come on, I’m not a dumbass! But I admit, what I did wasn’t cool. I’m sorry!”

“...Fine. In honor of Uwa white-knighting for Enjouji-san, I’ll let it go.”

“I was *not* white-knighting,” Chihiro retorted.

The first-years all seemed to be on such good terms with

each other... It gave Taichi a bit of hope.

As they walked out of the classroom, Enjouji gasped for breath as if she was drowning. "Did we... achieve our goal...?"

"I think that's the most we can expect for right now," Chihiro nodded.

"...You know, I'm impressed how well you two are holding up," Taichi remarked as the thought occurred to him.

"Uh, Taichi-san? Where did *that* come from?"

"It just crossed my mind, that's all. You've had to tolerate so much insanity... First the phenomena, and now this..."

"You promised to stop patronizing us about this. We came here of our own free will."

"It... It feels like you still don't see us as equals..."

"...But you absolutely are. You're right. I'm sorry."

It was a sense of guilt that had pushed him to say that. What would he stand to gain by drawing a line between him and them? Nothing.

"This fight's as real for us as it is for you," Chihiro declared.

They all had something riding on this plan. Something worth protecting. And Chihiro and Enjouji were worthy allies in their own right.



"How'd it go?" Taichi asked as they met up with Inaba and Aoki near the gym.

"Well, they were willin' to hear us out. Said they were more likely to believe us over the student council, since we have past experience. And they even bought into our slogan, 'United 'til the end.' 'Course, Inabacchan was the one who did all the talking!" Aoki explained.

"They seemed to agree with us, at least verbally. But I noticed there's fewer people in the second-year classrooms..."

I mean, there's supposed to be roughly 80 of them, not including us..." Inaba mused.

"Too many for you to handle?" Chihiro asked.

"Says the kid who would rather hide in the corner than speak to a crowd..."

"Wow. Is that how you see me? I mean, I won't deny it, but... Huh?"

Just then, someone popped out of the West Wing, where the cafeteria and library were located, and made a beeline right for them.

"Hey, CRC!"

It was student council president Katori Jouji, accompanied by the vice president, the outreach committee, and Fujishima Maiko. What were they up to?

"I hear you've been acting independently from us. And not only that, but you have prior experience with the phenomena?!"

"We felt like the people needed to know, so we told them. That's all," Inaba shrugged in the face of Katori's fury.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner? Was I right about you back then? Back when we were dealing with the rumors?"

"We didn't want to jump to any hasty conclusions. We may have experience with the phenomena, but this is still our first time being trapped in one specific location, so we wanted to make sure we knew what we were dealing with."

"You still should have put everything on the table upfront. And if you're going to take action, get my permission first."

"Who died and made you dictator?"

"There can only be one person at the top, or it'll cause conflict. Now quit acting out of turn, goddamn it."

"Katori-kun, don't you think—"

"Did you say something, Fujishima?"

"...No, it's nothing..."

For a second it looked like Fujishima was going to intervene, but then she backed down.

"Real talk, don'tcha think there's kinda no point in us

bickering about it now?" Aoki offered, casually changing the flow of the conversation. It was an impressive move, and Taichi was more than happy to join in.

"We all need to be on the same page, including the student council. Right, Inaba?"

"Well, obviously. But if we're pointing fingers, then *they're* the ones to blame."

Katori clapped his hands together. "Alright, I'll take the blame for this one. I shouldn't have bit your heads off without hearing you out first. After all, we owe it to your past experience that you're all calm enough to focus on helping other people."

"Yeah? And?"

"Let's discuss things with each other before we go around making big speeches to the rest of the student body. Both your group and ours. And if you have any additional info about the phenomena, we'd love to hear it."

"You're right... Maybe it wasn't a good idea to act on our own."

The guy had a point; even Inaba could see that. The tension between them softened, and everyone looked relieved, even VP Sasaki and the outreach committee. The CRC weren't the only ones working to help the victims. Katori was doing his best to do what he believed was right, and infighting wouldn't help anyone.

"Okay then, uh... You know about our mind-reading phenomenon, right? I'd like to know what phenomena you guys have, for future reference."

At Inaba's request, Katori grimaced—but he seemed to intuit that he couldn't very well avoid answering the question. Honestly, it was kind of strange that they hadn't noticed so much as a trace of anything supernatural going on with the student council thus far. Could it be chalked up to a simple matter of timing? Or were they intentionally keeping it discreet?

"Myself and the rest of the student council are currently

undergoing a phenomenon in which we can see the future experiences of our fellow members.”

“Future experiences...? What, so you get visions of the future?”

“Mmm, I don’t know if I’d call ten seconds from now ‘the future.’ Not like we’re able to see the outcome, either.”

“So all you see is the actions they start to take?”

“I’d say that’s a pretty apt description.”

While it sounded like they couldn’t do anything to change each other’s futures, they were still made aware of each other’s actions. This would also explain why their phenomenon wasn’t outwardly visible.

From there, Katori asked the CRC about their past experiences, and so they (primarily Inaba) went into detail about the body-swap and the Liberation. They had decided not to mention the rest of them to anyone, since it might frighten people to learn exactly how many phenomena the CRC had gone through. After all, it might make them think that there really was no end in sight...

“So in both cases, the only solution was to sit around and wait? That’s not much help,” Katori complained. Evidently he’d been hoping for something more promising.

“That’s just how these things work. Which is why we were trying to explain it to everyone.”

“Though it’d be annoying if people started to listen to you,” Katori muttered under his breath.

And so, with a firm agreement to stay in touch, the CRC and student council went their separate ways.

“Perhaps we should find out what everyone thinks of the speeches you gave. That way we can see whether you’ve filled their heads with nonsense,” Katori declared.

“At least you’re honest, I guess,” Inaba snarked.

“Well, see you!” said vice president Sasaki with a quick bow.

“Let’s go, guys!” first-year Adachi announced to the outreach committee.

"Yes, ma'am!" Fujishima answered.

Wait, what?

"Hold on a sec! I was gonna let it go, but... isn't this kind of backwards? I mean, you're a first-year! Shouldn't Fujishima-san be the one calling the shots?" Aoki asked.

Why on earth would a *first-year* be in charge?

Fujishima stopped short, as did Adachi.

"S-Sorry about that, Fujishima-san! I didn't mean to be rude!" Adachi shouted, bowing in apology several times in quick succession.

"Don't worry about it. You run along without me."

"R-Right you are, boss!"

This time Fujishima took charge, sending Adachi away. Then, once the rest of her group had left, she turned back to the CRC.

"If you're looking for an explanation... The four members of the student council outreach committee, yours truly included, are all facing a phenomenon in which we perform each other's roles at random."

"How does that work?" Taichi asked.

"When the phenomenon strikes, I sort of... step into someone else's shoes, mentally speaking. And in exchange, someone steps into mine. It's a compulsion we feel, deep down."

"That sounds kind of complicated... but in practice, it's probably not so bad," Chihiro muttered.

"H-Hang in there, Fujishima-senpai!" Enjouji called.

"...Thank you. I will."

But before she could leave, Inaba stopped her.

"Hey, Fujishima... I'd like to ask you something. Earlier, when Katori and I were starting to get into it... You were going to intervene, but then you seemed to change your mind. Was that an effect of your phenomenon?"

Fujishima flinched slightly.

"I don't know if you can relate, but... sometimes, all that motivates me to do my job is the knowledge that it's *my* role

to play,” she explained without turning back, her fingers clutching the student council armband affixed to her left arm. “And when those lines get blurry, well... it makes me wonder why I should bother working hard at all.”

Unfortunately, the CRC didn’t have a solution to her worries.



Time passed, and the sun set once more. Meanwhile, the CRC continued to encourage everyone to support each other. Supposedly Katori had made the rounds through the school building as well, but there were no major incidents.

Wherever there was a gathering of people, the CRC stopped in to give a speech. Additionally, they did their best to track down the fringe groups, like Kurihara’s, and talk to them as well. Then they met back up, reshuffled their teams, and headed back out again.

This time, Taichi was accompanied by Nagase and Kiriyaama as he walked down the hall.

“Whew... We’ve worked from sunrise all the way to sundown!” Nagase exclaimed, stretching her arms. “Ugh, just saying it out loud makes me want to pass out.”

“But all we’ve done is ask them to band together. We’re only just getting started,” Taichi cautioned her.

Obviously these people weren’t going to jump onboard at the drop of a hat. It would take more than words or deeds to truly convince even *one* person... and they were dealing with far more than just one.

“Yeah, I know. That’s why we’re making a second pass, right?”

Indeed, they were all going to check back in with the same classrooms and clubrooms they visited earlier. Partly they were hoping to get feedback from the other students, but they also wanted to make sure no shutdown-worthy incidents had occurred in the interim. They couldn’t let their

guard down for even a single moment.

"Am I overthinking things, or are there, like, *way* more people outside now?" Kiriya muttered as she looked at the students on the athletic field.

"I was told they're making one last attempt to look for a way out," Taichi commented as he thought back to some conversations he'd had earlier. Several different people had expressed their desire to try to get out. They seemed aware that it was futile, and yet... he got the sense that they just couldn't let go somehow.

The three of them headed into Classroom 2-B. And since they knew they could expect to see a lot of familiar faces, they weren't too shy about pulling open the door and—

Stunned, they stopped short. The room was practically deserted, save for two groups: Nakayama's and Miyagami's. Eight people in total.

"What the...? Where *is* everyone?" asked a perplexed Kiriya.

"Why'd it get so quiet all of a sudden? Where's the other 60 percent of the class?" asked Nagase.

Both Nagase and Kiriya had visited this classroom earlier at lunchtime, and they'd observed 20-plus students present at the time.

"They all left," said class president Setouchi, sounding utterly defeated.

"What happened? When we talked to them earlier, they sounded like they were willing to try to work together!" Kiriya protested weakly.

"Yeah, and they *did* try," said Watase. "They tried to be open with each other about their phenomena. But it didn't go well."

"What do you mean? What happened?" asked Taichi, panicked.

"There was a bit of an argument, and then the relevant parties were 'too embarrassed' to stay in the classroom any longer," Ishikawa explained calmly.

“But... our whole point was that we need to overcome those petty squabbles and stick together...”

“Yeah, but once people start pointing fingers and suspecting each other, the only option is to leave,” said Miyagami as he fidgeted with his glasses.

“Oh, but it sounded like they were going to stay in their phenomenon groups, at least,” Sone added helpfully.

That made sense, since most people had been grouped up with their classmates or clubmates—people they saw as friends.

“But we wanted to stay, since you asked us to... and it sounds like you have experience with all this,” said Nakayama.

“Thank you for trusting us, Nakayama-chan,” Nagase replied.

“Aw, no prob! It’s obviously the right thing to do, y’know?” she grinned. “But... Wait... Oh no, I think it’s happening...”

With no more warning than that, Nakayama grimaced and squeezed one of her pigtails, like she was trying to brace herself against... something.

“Are you alright, Nakayama? Who is it this time?” asked Ishikawa, her boyfriend, as he hurried over.

But Nakayama ignored him and started walking, unsteadily, in the direction of Watase. When she reached him, she stopped short and collapsed against him.

“Whoa!” Hastily, he moved to support her weight.

“Heeheehee...” Grinning, Nakayama clung to him, nuzzling her face playfully against his—and a split-second later, her eyes widened in horror as she shoved him away at full force, leaping backwards. In the momentum, she slammed her hip against the desk behind her. “Ouch!”

“Wh-... What’s going on all of a sudden?!” Nagase yelped.

“Goddamn it, they’ve been like this all day! I’m so jealous, I could die!”

“...I can feel your pain, Miyagami... Now my heart’s

breaking in more ways than one...”

“I really wish our phenomenon wouldn’t pick the worst possible times to trigger!”

Apparently Sone had picked up Miyagami’s Sentiment Transmission.

“Okay, but seriously, like... what *was* that?” Kiriya asked, tilting her head as she looked around the room at everyone present.

Meanwhile, Nakayama silently stared at the floor, her face bright red as she rubbed her hip.

“It’s our phenomenon,” Setouchi sighed. “When it strikes, it chooses someone at random and changes how you feel about them. One minute you might like them, and the next minute you might hate them.”

“And you can’t fight those feelings, either. Your body acts on them either way,” Watase added, his expression muted.

“And the degree of intensity is random, too. Sometimes it’s faint, and sometimes it’s overpowering. Sometimes it strikes all at once, and sometimes there’s a slow buildup. Sometimes it lasts for just a few seconds, and other times it lasts longer. My guess is, it hit Nakayama-chan hard and fast that time. Right?”

“I... I’m so ashamed...”

“It’s okay, Nakayama-chan! You’re always physically affectionate with us girls, right? This time it was with a guy, that’s all!”

“That doesn’t make it okay, lori!”

“It’s alright. I know it’s just the phenomenon at work,” Ishikawa reassured his girlfriend.

“I’m so sorry, Ishikawa-kun... I’m sorry for what I did...”

“It was just the phenomenon. It’s okay,” he declared firmly, like a total badass, and Nakayama smiled softly.

But Taichi had seen the pained look on Ishikawa’s face as Nakayama pressed herself against Watase. Not to suggest Ishikawa was lying to her on purpose, but he was by no means *okay*. And those feelings would slowly build up over

time... What would happen when it all reached a breaking point?

Then Miyagami changed the subject—whether intentionally or not, it was hard to say.

“I gotta say, Yaegashi, I’m impressed with the CRC taking charge. I get that you have past experience, but still... you’re not the student council or anything, y’know?”

“Well, we wanted to help everyone—”

Out of nowhere, a loud voice rang out from the hallway: *“No one said anything about that!”*

The tension was palpable. At first it froze Taichi in place, but he quickly snapped himself out of it. “Nagase, Kiriya, let’s go. The rest of you, stay here!”

“Huh? Yaegashi-kun? Iori? Yui-chan?”

“We’ll talk to you guys later!” Nagase shouted as the CRC made a beeline for the door.

As they ran out into the hall, they spotted a group of girls standing near the stairway landing.

“You wouldn’t have acted that way if you didn’t see it that way!”

“I’m telling you, it was the stupid phenomenon!”

“Guys, let’s calm down...”

“The phenomenon has nothing to do with this!”

They were having a heated argument.

“This looks bad...”

Images flashed through Taichi’s mind. Fighting, drifting apart, vanishing into thin air. The emergency shutdown.

Obviously he had no way of knowing their current mental states, but still, they couldn’t turn a blind eye to this.

“We gotta stop them!”

Nagase took off running. Taichi and Kiriya followed after her.

“Shut the hell up! I’m sick of you!”

“Well, what a coincidence! Because *I’m* sick of *you!*”

One of the arguing girls turned away... only to end up face to face with the CRC. For a moment, she stopped short in

surprise, but then she collected herself and stormed away from the scene, her face flushed red. Meanwhile, the other participant in the argument ran down the stairs in the opposite direction... leaving a third girl, the one who had tried to play mediator, behind. She was rooted to the spot, visibly unsure of what to do.

Taichi called out to the girl headed their way. "What happened? I know these phenomena can cause a lot of problems, and if you'd like to talk to us about it, we're here for you."

"I'm going that way!" Kiriya declared as Taichi spoke, running past him and down the stairs.

Meanwhile, the girl Taichi spoke to stared at the floor and tried to keep walking.

"Come on," Nagase called to her.

"What the hell do you people want from me?! You don't even know me!"

"I'm sorry. I'm just worried about you. Take some time to be alone if you need it, but once you've calmed down, you should try talking to her again. She's your *friend*, you know? You don't want it to end like—"

"Just be quiet!"

With that, the girl raced down the hall to the stairs, turned the corner, and—

"Aaah!"

"Look out!" Taichi shouted, but it was too late.

She was in such a rush, she lost her balance and fell to the ground on her behind. Taichi raced over to her.

"Ow ow ow..."

The girl clutched at her tailbone, but other than that, she seemed to be fine... On second thought, he should have expected this, since no serious injury was possible here in the Isolation Zone.

"God, it hurts! I'm sick of this! It's not supposed to be like this!"

"Hey, uh, are you alright? Can you stand?" Nagase

reached out and took her by the arm.

“I can’t do this anymore... I’m so pathetic...!”



The girl started to sob. Nagase pulled her up, and she rose onto her feet.

"For now, let's go find the rest of your group," said Taichi.

"What for? This whole time, she was acting like she was my friend, but deep down, she never actually liked me. And I was stupid for believing she ever did. So yeah, friendship over."

"It's not over! It's not!" Taichi insisted hastily. The girl seemed like she'd completely given in to despair, and it was making him panic.

"You're right... It's not over. Because it never even started."

"If you just talk it out with her, I'm sure it'll work out!"

He had no evidence of this, but he spoke firmly, as though he did. Then her expression softened, and he wondered if perhaps he'd finally gotten through to her... but before he could heave a sigh of relief, he realized her smile was one of defeat.

"As much as I'd like that... I just don't think it's possible with this phenomena stuff goi—Huh?"

Suddenly she froze, confused, right in the middle of her sentence. There was a strange pause as her tears dried.

"What's... wrong...?"

"Uh... I don't... know...?" She blinked like a newborn kitten. Something felt off about her.

"Well, if you're feeling up to it, let's go find your friends."

"Um... okay..."

She obediently followed Taichi and the others as they set off walking. His heart started to pound in his chest. Why was she so different all of a sudden?

Then the third girl—the mediator girl who was left behind after the other two went their separate ways—spotted them and ran over.

"Miu! Miu! Let's agree not to fight anymore, okay? We can talk it out with her!"

"Uhh... who are you?"

Instantly, goosebumps broke out all over Taichi's body. And the next moment, the presence next to him... disappeared?

He turned his head to look.

She was there just a second ago, and now she wasn't.

Could she have teleported? Could she have run to the end of the hall? Could she have jumped out of the window?

"...She vanished...?" the other girl asked.

"IORI! TAICHI!"

Right at that moment, Kiriyama came barreling up the stairs at the speed of light. She dashed over to where they were standing and hit the brakes.

"The girl who went down the stairs—she's gone! It's like she vanished! I'm sure I would've noticed her sneaking away from me... She didn't come this way, did she?!"

"...*Vanished*...?" The other girl collapsed on the spot.

Now new voices joined them from down the hall.

"Whoa, are you okay?! Who vanished?! Wait... What happened to the third girl?"

"People are... disappearing...?"

It was the group of eight from Classroom 2-B, peering at them through the open door.



Night fell, and soon it would be time for dinner rations to be handed out. Katori had put out an intercom announcement requesting everyone to meet up in the gym. But first, the CRC gathered in the courtyard to have a discussion.

"They vanished?"

"Two of them?"

At the news, Chihiro and Enjouji started to tremble.

"We completely misjudged what we're up against... The criteria... The rate of acceleration..." Inaba's face was ashen as she came to terms with her own miscalculations. "It's all

too easy to cause a shutdown in here... Now that I think about it, this should've been obvious, but we let ourselves get too comfy with «Heartseed»'s way of doing things..."

"Whoever «The Third» is, it's nothing like what we're used to. And «The Second» is pretty weird, too," Nagase added, her tone laced with mild panic. "Do you think... maybe this is their *normal* speed?"

It was hard to say... but right now, it was «The Third»'s group who set the rules.

"Hey, guys? What should we do about Nakayama-chan and Watase-kun? And all the other people who saw them disappear?" Kiriama asked anxiously.

Having witnessed the emergency shutdown, Watase and the others were now completely unnerved. At the time, the CRC's only option was to say they would look around to see if they could find the missing girls.

As of this morning, they had convinced everyone who had lost a friend to the emergency shutdown to stay quiet about it, but at this rate, there were probably other instances of shutdowns they knew nothing about.

"Right now, Katori's group is going around questioning people about it in the name of 'investigation'... We ought to follow up with them, but we don't have enough hands...! Argh!" Inaba clutched at her hair in frustration.

They were falling behind in every capacity.

"We need to change how we do things," Inaba declared, a suggestion the club was unanimously in favor of. There was no use reaching out on an individual basis. And so their next plan of attack would take place in the gym, where everyone had gathered for dinner rations.

But the summons didn't reach the full population; only 70 or 80 people turned up. Of the absent students, some had chosen not to go, while others were no longer around to hear the announcement at all, thanks to the emergency shutdown. At least, that was their current hypothesis.

When they struck upon the idea of going around campus to check on the absentees, Chihiro and Enjouji volunteered for the task.

“If we find anyone, we’ll encourage them to go to the gym!”

“We just gotta pray that most of these people are still around somewhere... See you later.”

Once the first-years were gone, the five second-years of the CRC headed off to their battlefield.

One by one, they filed onto the stage. Now that they were elevated above the crowd, approximately 80 pairs of eyes turned to look at them. They had full permission from Katori to do this—as long as he could be right nearby to supervise them.

“We’re the Cultural Research Club, and if you’d be willing to give us a moment of your time, we’d like to talk to everyone.”

There was only one mic, so they were required to take turns to use it. First up was Taichi.

“Earlier today we visited a few classrooms and other groups, but now we’d like to make a formal appeal to everyone: We shouldn’t let this divide us. We must all stay united.”

The microphone magnified his voice, carrying it across the gym and through the speakers, to the point that it didn’t really sound like his voice anymore. Not only was he nervous to speak in front of a large crowd, but he was terrified of «The Third» realizing they knew too much. It felt like his soul was trying to leave his body.

Then Nagase pressed a hand to his chest and gently pushed him out of the way so she could speak.

“We know this is all going to end eventually, so in the meantime, let’s all work together to support each other.”

The crowd started to whisper amongst themselves. It wasn’t clear whether the reaction was positive or negative; mostly they were just confused as to why this message was

coming from the CRC of all people.

Then it was Kiriya's turn, and Taichi shuffled further to the side to accommodate her.

"In case anybody hasn't heard, we've actually dealt with these phenomena in the past."

The murmuring grew distinctly louder. Then Aoki took the mic.

"And we made it through A-OK! Sounds like we prolly know what we're talkin' about, am I right?"

Then, lastly, their MVP walked up—Inaba.

"So in order to get us all through this as safely as possible, rather than letting everyone roam around willy-nilly, we'd like to propose assigned locations for each group."

In other words, a system of documentation. This way the CRC could keep track of everyone at all times.

Unsurprisingly, the crowd reacted with uncertainty. Perhaps they sensed that there was some sort of danger afoot.

"Hold it," called an icy voice.

Katori Jouji walked onstage, a wireless microphone in hand.

"You want to create a management system? Funny, I didn't get the memo."

"You gave us permission to have this conversation, remember?"

"I was under the impression you were going to talk about *yourselves*. You need to talk to me about these things in advance. Or what, you think you can organize it all on your own?"

Sparks flew between Katori and Inaba. In a way, it felt like they were both looking for any excuse to bite each other's heads off. The crowd was practically rolling their eyes.

Then a hand shot straight into the air as a voice called out: "I wanna ask something!"

"Is that you, Watase? Go for it," Katori answered into his

mic.

But Watase shook his head. “Not you, Prez—I wanna ask Yaegashi and the rest of the CRC!”

As the crowd grew quiet, his voice echoed through the gym, even without the help of a microphone.

“I mean, not to interrupt the little party you guys are having up there, but I want answers!”

At this, it occurred to Taichi just how much time they’d wasted arguing with Katori.

“So what’s the story with people disappearing, exactly? Do you have any information on that?”

“N-Not really... This is my first time being trapped in one fixed location like this,” Inaba stammered awkwardly. She probably wasn’t prepared to discuss it in front of a giant audience.

Then Watase fixed Taichi with an intent, searching look. Did he intentionally ask them in front of everyone so that they wouldn’t be able to backpedal out of it?

“We’ve been aware of this issue for quite some time, and currently we’re investigating the situation. It seems like quite a few people who were originally trapped here with us are now missing,” Katori declared confidently, possibly to spite Inaba.

However... this only kindled a sense of unrest from the crowd. The murmurs from earlier transformed into something quite different. Then a different person called out:

“Okay, but... they haven’t *literally* vanished, right? It’s not like we’ll never see them ever again, right?”

It was Setouchi Kaoru, standing close to Watase.

“Of all the times we spent enduring the phenomena, not once have we ever been in any serious danger, so... I’d say we don’t have to worry about that,” Inaba replied.

The CRC knew the truth, of course, since «Heartseed» and «The Second» had told them directly. But it wasn’t safe to reveal it here.

“Do you think maybe they escaped?” called Nakayama

Mariko. Indeed, this was the easiest possibility one could arrive at.

"It doesn't really seem to be that easy to get out of here, so... somehow I don't think that's the case..."

"I thought you guys were supposed to know these things! Do you have the answers or not?!" shouted some other voice from the crowd—a frustrated voice.

"Watase, you and the rest of your group were there when it happened. You saw what they were like right before they disappeared, didn't you? Did it seem like a positive outcome?"

Inaba was trying to cast a negative light on the circumstances surrounding the disappearances.

"Well, when you put it that way, no..."

"There you have it. We don't know enough about it to say it's safe. Therefore, we should put some rules in place so we can all stay together."

At last, she reached the point she was trying to make.

"I'm afraid I can't readily agree to that, CRC," said Katori into his mic.

"Why are you being such a naysayer?" Taichi asked Katori reflexively.

"What, you want me to just nod along to whatever you say? That's absurd. Fact is, anyone with an objective view of the situation would question your proposal."

"You want to know another fun fact? It looks like you're shooting us down with no clear reason behind it," Inaba shot back.

"What evidence is there that we'll have an easier time if we all stick together?"

"If we're all in close proximity of one another, we'll be able to respond if any trouble breaks out. You can't deny that."

"Don't you think maybe these problems are *caused* by people staying in close proximity?"

"But these problems can be resolved with *communication*

and *understanding*.”

Taichi and the others watched with bated breath as the argument continued back and forth.

“I’m sure all your past experience has made you feel that way about *yourselves*. But are you confident that will apply to everyone here?”

“You can’t be sure that it won’t.”

“So there’s no definitive evidence either way. In that case, why not let everyone decide for themselves?”

“Because...!” Inaba grimaced and fell silent.

Because it wasn’t the right thing to do. It clearly wasn’t. But right now, given the current flow of the conversation, they were at a disadvantage. Katori was making them look like they were trying to force their beliefs on everyone.

“Yes, everyone should be free to decide for themselves. All we want is for people to hear us out and consider our viewpoint, because we don’t think it’s a good idea for everyone to distance themselves,” Inaba continued, not to Katori, but to the crowd.

“Whoa now, don’t get the wrong idea. I *do* want to work with you, and in fact, I *do* think some order should be established. That’s why I keep gathering everyone here.” Katori was quick to ensure he stayed in the crowd’s good graces. “I just don’t think we should be placing restrictions on people. Doesn’t it make more sense to let everyone do whatever makes them most comfortable?”

“And what is *that* supposed to be?! What is your recommendation here?!” a voice shouted from the crowd. Whoever it was, they didn’t raise their hand as they spoke, so it was impossible to tell who it was.

“We’re looking into it at the moment.”

“Isn’t that what you said on day one?” shouted a feminine voice.

“Hurry up already!” shouted another girl.

The mood in the gym was slowly turning oppressive and hostile. They were openly criticizing Katori. But was this

advantageous to the CRC?

“Not that the CRC’s idea is any better...”

“There’s no way we can all stick together. Not with these phenomena.”

“I feel like the President will figure something out for us eventually...”

“If he doesn’t, we’re screwed!”

All at once, a dozen different opinions flew around the room. They were directed at each other rather than Katori or the CRC, but they were still spoken at a volume loud enough for the people onstage to hear. In this giant mass of people, there was no way to discern who said what.

Normally whenever someone spoke out in a crowd, the people around them would instinctively turn to look at them, but no one did. Almost as though these opinions represented the will of the people. Granted, maybe Taichi was just being paranoid, but... without a name to attach to the opinion, it felt like that opinion was coming from the entire student body...

Either way, it was clear that neither the CRC nor the student council had won the crowd’s support. A haze of unease and discontent swirled all around them. So instead of prolonging their speech, the CRC ended the conversation with “Please give it some thought” and walked offstage.

“Well, that didn’t go over as well as it could have,” Kiriya muttered once they were safely out of sight.

“Not our fault. Katori derailed the whole thing,” Inaba growled. “If we let ourselves keep bickering with him, we’d end up splitting the whole group into ‘Katori’ and ‘CRC’ factions. And lest we forget, we’re trying to protect *everyone*—including him.”

“Is it just me, or did it feel like he was looking for *any* reason to fight us?” Taichi mused. He couldn’t help but wish Katori would see things their way. With the student council on their side, they would have a fighting chance of bringing everyone together.

“*You!*”

“What the?!” Kiriya whirled around in a karate stance, but then she saw who it was and relaxed. “Oh, it’s Katori-kun.”

“You people think you can decide these things for everyone? Hardly democratic, wouldn’t you say?”

“I apologize for failing to communicate it to you, but we’ve been busy,” Inaba replied.

“You never stop to think about us; you always try to handle it all yourselves. Why is it you can’t consider the possibility that you’re wrong? Is it your past experience giving you false confidence?”

“We take *all kinds of things* into consideration before we take action,” Taichi shot back reflexively.

“And yet you act like you’re the ultimate authority.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” Inaba snarked.

“I only act that way because I have a reputation to uphold as the student council president. When it comes down to it, I always let the group decide.” He looked over his shoulder at the student council members standing behind him. “How about it, guys? Are you on board with the CRC? Wanna take their gamble?”

At this sudden question, the rest of the student council reacted with uncertainty.

“Uhhh... I mean, if I had to choose...”

“We’re on the student council. Obviously we’d be on your side, Prez.”

“If you want to go for it, Prez, then I’m all for it.”

Katori nodded, smugly satisfied. “Clearly it was a mistake to let you people run wild. Now everyone’s confused. We’ll be better off if I run everything myself, like they want me to... Yes, I’ve got just the ticket...”

Muttering to himself, Katori and the rest of the student council walked off. And as Taichi watched them go, he couldn’t help but worry that this was representative of a deep fissure between them.

But there was one person who stayed behind: Fujishima Maiko. She stood a short distance away from them, cradling one arm protectively.

“To be honest... you people scare me.”

“How come?” Taichi asked, confused.

“It feels like... like you’re above it all, somehow.”

Once Chihiro and Enjouji returned from doing their rounds, they learned that many of the students who didn’t turn up at the gym were indeed present elsewhere on campus.

But the atmosphere was clearly starting to change.

A movement was building. A big one.

Chapter 4: Sabotage

And so Day 3 of the Isolation Zone began. The sun rose in the sky, and from that they extrapolated that it was morning, although it didn't quite feel like the correct amount of time had passed.

That morning, there was no intercom announcement summoning them to the gym.

There were very few people wandering around the school. Perhaps they had finally come to terms with the fact that they wouldn't be able to find a way out. Most of them had relegated themselves to a space where they felt comfortable. As the CRC walked around campus, they tried to peek into a classroom when they were suddenly stopped:

"Hey. That's our room."

"Oh, okay. Sorry."

The students were starting to get territorial.

Had their speech yesterday made any kind of impact at all?

The vast majority of the population had chosen to stick to their phenomenon groups. And outside of a few close friends, they didn't interact with anyone outside of those groups.

The CRC split into two teams: Taichi/Nagase/Kiriyama/Chihiro and Inaba/Aoki/Enjouji. Their goal: to speak to the students about their proposal from yesterday and try to win them over. Granted, they planned to go over the details later that night, assuming everyone would meet up again, but until then, they wanted to lay the groundwork while collecting feedback at the same time.

"I'm back!" Kiriyama called, returning from her solo visit

to the track team clubroom. Evidently the body-swap girls were still cooped up in there. “Ugh... I was really hoping to talk to Yukina today.”

“No luck?” Nagase asked.

“She’s still out there, searching for Misaki-chan.” She grimaced like it was tearing her heart in two.

Taichi and the rest of his team were combing the East Wing. Every time they encountered other students, they spoke to them. But for some reason, very few were willing to give them the time of day.

At the next clubroom, one of the students met them at the door without letting them inside. “There’s five people in our group, but two of them aren’t here right now. Could you come back later?”

“They didn’t vanish, though, did they...?” Kiriya asked awkwardly.

“No, no. Although we’d really like to get out of this world ASAP so I can stop having to deal with this phenomenon. And while we’re on the subject—actually, never mind.”

“Okie-doke! See ya later,” Nagase replied cheerfully. And with that, they walked off.

“Should we really just let it go, Nagase-san?” asked Chihiro. “I get the sense they’re not actually going to let us in later.”

“I know, but we can’t just force our way in there.”

“I wonder what’s going on. What’s the harm in hearing us out, you know?” Taichi mused aloud. Now that they’d confessed about their past experience, one would think these people would have a lot of questions for them.

“Maybe they’re afraid of us...?” Kiriya suggested.

“Let’s hope Inaban’s group is having an easier time. First they warm up the room with Aoki’s charisma and Enjouji’s adorable puppydog eyes, and then Inaban goes in for the kill, or something!”

Taichi wanted to believe Nagase was right. And at the same time, he felt a competitive urge to try harder. With his

motivation restored, he set off once more.

The jazz band group was holed up in the practice room on the top floor of the East Wing.

"H-Hey there, CRC," Shiroyama greeted them as they stood politely outside the door, waiting for permission to come in. His smile looked stiff, but hopefully Taichi was just seeing things.

"You guys doing okay? Any problems? Or is it more of a 'What part of this looks *okay* to you?!' kinda situation?" Nagase joked lightheartedly.

"No real issues here," Shiroyama answered offhandedly.

"Your group's phenomenon involves lying and saying messed-up stuff, right?" asked Taichi.

"*Wrong.*"

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry... No, you're right. That was the phenomenon just now."

"Oh, I see. Wow, that sounds obnoxious to deal with."

"That's putting it lightly... Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"We were wondering if we could talk to you guys," Kiriama answered. "It's about the stuff we mentioned last night."

"Uhhhh... Sorry, Kiriama-san. Not that I think you guys are flat-out *wrong* or anything, but... well... with our phenomenon, there's no telling when we might say something horrible. And I really don't want to create any misunderstandings, so..."

"We can handle it," Nagase replied reassuringly without missing a beat.

"But *we* can't."

All they wanted was to stand inside the room and say their piece. Otherwise they couldn't get anywhere.

"Listen to me, Shiroyama. We're all dealing with phenomena here. I'm sure you understand, but these things

aren't your fault. So when the phenomenon strikes, the other people around you will understand."

"They won't."

But this denial didn't feel natural. It felt like a mechanical, automated response.

"Was that the phenomenon, too?"

"Yeah, it was... but at the same time, it wasn't." Averting his eyes, Shiroyama sadly shook his head.

What? Taichi stared back in confusion.

"Why do you want us to stick together so bad? I mean, sure, it'd be great if we could all help each other, but it's just not realistic."

"Maybe not completely, but it's a goal to work towards—"

"That's bizarre," Shiroyama cut in sharply. There was a moment of silence.

"Uh, Shiroyama? Was that...?"

"No, it wasn't the phenomenon. It was all me. It was me. It was *me!*" he repeated over and over, like he was trying to convince himself... like he was *fighting* himself. Was the phenomenon starting to take its toll on his sanity?

If any attempt to help him would only make it worse, then there was no point. Their only option was to back down.

"Okay, well, we won't force you. We just want to keep everyone safe, that's all."

"I just don't get it," Shiroyama whimpered, his eyes tinged with fear. "How are you able to focus on other people right now?"

In the end, Shiroyama was the only member of the jazz band they managed to speak to that day.

Downstairs, in the first-year classroom, Kimura's group had an even more aggressive stance.

"U-Uwa... Are you seriously on the CRC's side...? Ouch!"

Shimono, the guy with glasses, jabbed Kimura hard in the side.

"What do you mean, on the CRC's side?" Chihiro

muttered.

“Uh, nothing! It’s nothing. Anyway, that’s all we have to say.”

And so Shimono and the rest of the first-years headed back into their classroom.

“W-Wait! Don’t leave me here!”

“Hey, Kimura.”

Taichi grabbed him by the arm. He could be a bit of a ditz, so a more direct approach was necessary.

“Eeeek! Strike me, command phenomenon! Shimono, Tada, hold it right there! ...Ugh, I should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy!”

“Why are you in such a hurry to run away from us?”

“I’m not running from you, Yaegashi-san! I’ve got a ton of respect for you.”

“Then why are you acting so weird?” Chihiro asked, joining the interrogation.

“Because of the rumor—ack!”

“What rumor?”

“Taichi!” called Nagase.

“Chihiro-kun!” shouted Kiriyaama.

“Don’t mess with him too much!”

“It’s bullying!”

They were right, of course, but... it felt like Kimura just let something slip.

“Please... could you tell us about the rumor? We might be able to shed some light on the situation.”

“...Well, okay, I’ll tell you... but this is just stuff I overheard, alright?” Hesitantly, Kimura glanced at them, then back at the classroom door. “There’s this weird rumor going around that... your club is trying to make us all have to stay here longer. And some say that you’re the ones pulling the strings behind the scenes.”

“What are you talking about? Who on earth would think that?” Nagase muttered.

“Well, I heard it from another first-year, but he said he

heard it from someone else. Someone on the student council, I think...?"

When it came time to meet back up with the other team, they returned to the clubroom, where they found Inaba, Aoki, and Enjouji waiting for them. As soon as they walked in, Inaba shouted "You're late! Let's go!" and pushed them right back out again. "We have to find out if the student council is spreading rumors about us!"

Clearly they'd heard about it, too. With Inaba leading the way, the CRC headed to the student council office in the West Wing.

"We're coming in!" Inaba called, opening the door after a quick, perfunctory knock.

"Oh, it's you... You actually...?"

There was only one person in the office: bespectacled vice president Sasaki. As the seven members of the CRC filed into the room, he scooted his chair backwards. *What are you so afraid of?*

"Wh-What do you need?"

"Heard you assholes are spreading rumors about us. That true? Huh?"

"I... I haven't..."

"Inaban, you're freaking him out! See that? He's got his back pressed up against the wall!"

"You're right. We're not going to get anywhere with this wimp. Where's Katori?"

"...I don't know..."

"Oh, I don't buy that for a second. I know you know where he is, so don't hide it."

"I really don't!"

"Alright then, we'll find him ourselves. If you see him, let him know we're looking for him."

If Katori was out walking around campus, then their only option was to check all the populated areas. First, they sent Nagase and Chihiro to comb the West Wing. Then the rest of

the CRC headed down the stairs to the first floor.

There, at the connecting corridor leading to the North Wing, they found a student council member—a secretary—standing all by himself.

“What’s goin’ on?” Aoki asked.

“Oh, uh... nothing.”

Then why are you standing around here?

“There’s *definitely* something going on,” Inaba muttered suspiciously, and the secretary averted his eyes.

Clearly Katori and the student council were plotting something.

“Looks like we’d better hurry. Let’s split up!”

“I’ll check the gym!” shouted Aoki.

“Then I’ll take the North Wing,” said Taichi.

“Taichi, you start on the ground floor and work your way up. I’ll start on the top floor and work my way down!” said Kiriyaama.

“I... I’ll head over to the East Wing, then!” said Enjouji.

And so the four of them took off.

The North Wing was home to the staff room and a handful of special purpose classrooms; Taichi checked each of them in turn. There were students hanging out on the upper floors, but unsurprisingly the staff room was completely deserted. Then, right as he reached the second floor, Kiriyaama came down from the third floor.

“I checked all the rooms and asked everyone I came across, and they said Katori-kun isn’t here.”

“Gotcha... Wait, what? All the rooms?! *Already?!?*”

She must have been moving three times as fast... How was that even possible?

From there, they moved from the North Wing to the East Wing.

“Taichi! Yui! Over here!” Aoki shouted from behind them.

“Someone saw him walk into the dojo!”

Ordinarily the dojo was only used for judo and kendo practice. It was located on the first floor, directly beneath

the gym.

“I’m gonna go find Inabacchan and the others!”

And with that, Aoki headed off to the West Wing while Taichi and Kiriya headed for the dojo. On their way, they encountered another student council secretary standing in the hall, alone.

“Katori’s in the dojo, right?” Taichi asked... but the girl simply stared at the floor in silence. So they ignored her and kept going.

When they arrived outside the dojo, they could sense people inside.

“What do we do, Taichi? Should we wait for the others?”

“I’m sure they’ll be here in no time. Let’s go in.”

Gripped with indescribable panic, Taichi slid the door open and stepped into the dojo.

Inside were about ten... no, seven people: Katori, the four members of the student council outreach committee (including Fujishima Maiko), and two other male students. Taichi had never shared a class with them, and he didn’t know their names, but he recognized them as fellow second-years.

Katori and the outreach committee were standing around the two boys in a wide circle. There was a strange, palpable heat in the air that brought Taichi to a sudden stop.

Katori turned to look at the intruders, an icy smile plastered on his handsome face. Then he looked away, seemingly having lost interest, and Taichi naturally followed his gaze. The two unaffiliated students stood facing each other, their hands balled into fists. And then, out of nowhere

—

“Graaaaaahhh!”

—one of them swung his fist at the other. *Thud.*

“Guh! ...Raaaahhh!”

Then the other boy punched back—*thud.*

With the meaty impact of bone on bone, this was now a bona fide fistfight.

"Don't hold back! Let him have it!" Katori goaded them. Meanwhile, the outreach committee watched on in silence.

What am I looking at...? No, forget that—we have to stop them!

"Stop!"

"Stop it now!"

At last, Taichi and Kiriyaama recovered from their shock and regained their voices. But the boys didn't stop—they weren't listening. Not even the onlookers paid them any mind... except Katori, that is.

"It's too late."

He spoke as though he already knew what the outcome would be. As though he could see the future.

"Just disappear already!"

"No, you!"

Another punch. Then another. The sound of each impact made Taichi's stomach turn.

Stop! I can't bear to watch this!

Before they could run in, one of the boys dropped to his knee, and the fight came to a standstill. Sure enough, Katori was right—they were too late.

Just then, they heard voices behind them—

"The heck are you doin'?!"

"You goddamn morons!"

It was Aoki and Inaba.

"It's the CRC!" Fujishima whispered, frightened, like a child whose parents just walked in on her misbehaving.

Now nine people surrounded the two brawling boys: Katori, the four outreach committee members (three girls and one boy), Taichi, Kiriyaama, Inaba, and Aoki. Then, out of nowhere, one of the brawlers started to laugh.

"Haha... haha...! There... That's all we need to do, right?" He sounded completely broken inside.

Then the other one started to laugh, too. "Good! Now we can kiss this place goodbye! *Hahaha!*"

Neither of them were making any sense. Almost like they

were both in their own little world.

"It's over... It's over, it's over, it's over, it's over!"

"With this, we'll be saved! Right?!"

"We gotta be! I'm sure of it... I'm sure... Hnn..."

They were laughing, and yet... they were crying, too. Crying and laughing. Then, out of nowhere, it all came to a stop.

"Goddamn it... The last thing I wanted to do was punch my own friend!"

"We don't have a choice, remember?! Besides, you said you were cool with it!"

"This is all because of the phenomena! The stupid phenomena!"

"But at least now it'll come to an end, right? It's over now?"

They rambled on and on... until suddenly, something changed. All hostility and tension evaporated.

"What the?"

"Huh?"

They looked at each other, perplexed.

"Hey, uh... why's everyone standing around us in a circle?"

"No clue. And why're we in the center?"

It was as if the shouting and punching had never even happened—not a single bruise to be seen.

"Anyway, have we met? I don't think so. Are you a second-year?"

"Yeah, I am. Weird to think we never bumped into each other until now... So what's going on? What am I doing here?"

They had lost their memories of each other. Lost everything they'd built right from the moment they first met.

"Hey, do you recognize me?" Taichi asked on the spur of the moment. One of the boys looked over.

"Huh? Of course I recognize you, Yaegashi—"

And then the two boys vanished, just like that. There were no adjectives quite adequate enough to describe it. No gradual transition. It all happened so fast, Taichi half-wondered if they were ever there to begin with.

The room went completely silent... save for...

"I did it... At long last, I actually did it... I knew it! This was the right answer all along!"

Katori was *rejoicing*.

"I've found a way out of this world!"

"No, you haven't!" Inaba roared, flinging a metaphorical wet blanket on Katori's celebration.

"...Is that so, Inaba? That's funny... You sound rather sure of yourself," he replied in a perfectly calm tone of voice. The change was so sudden, it was mildly terrifying.

"There's no way this is the 'right answer'! Did you *see* them just now?"

"Are you speaking from past experience? Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Informed by your connections to the mastermind, I'm sure?"

"What... What the fuck...?"

"Seriously, what are you *talking* about? We heard you've been spreading rumors about us." Kiriya hissed through her tears. Taichi could practically feel her anger boiling over.

"I was simply honest about an observation I had made. Nothing more, nothing less."

"How is that any different?! What's your beef with us, Katori-kun?!" Kiriya demanded, seething quietly. But she wasn't the only one. Right now, she represented the entire CRC.

"I'm merely acting on behalf of the entire student body."

"Oh yeah? Smearing us to make yourself look better? Whatever. Let's set that aside for now."

Inaba's tone was steely. Instead of venting her fury, she was using it as fuel to systematically tear down her opponent.

"What did you do to those two students who were here just now?"

"Isn't it obvious? I was helping them escape," Katori gloated openly. "Once it was discovered that students were disappearing, the student council started gathering information. And from there, we learned that most of the disappearances took place immediately following a falling-out with a friend."

He spoke confidently, like he was standing at a podium.

"So we asked two students in the same phenomenon group to punch each other. Of course, we made sure to explain the situation and get their consent first. Both of them agreed that they hated this place so much, they were willing to take any risk to get out of here. Isn't that right?" he asked the outreach committee.

All four of them nodded dutifully. Fearfully.

"But... but you *saw* the way they acted before they disappeared! You really think you should be making them do this? Right at the end, they were acting like they'd forgotten each other completely!"

"It's just a temporary effect during the transition between worlds. Once they return to reality, they'll be back to normal."

"Just because you *want to believe that* doesn't make it true!"

"How would you have any idea what's true?!" Katori roared back. "Right from the start, you've all been so freakishly *calm*! Not a trace of emotional distress to be seen! And then it turns out you've been through all this before!"

"You're hardly any different, Katori," Taichi pointed out calmly. "You've been trying to lead these people, same as we have."

"Only because they were all expecting me to! And someone has to do it!"

"I get that you're trying to help people," Inaba nodded. "But I'm letting you know here and now: you're going about

it the wrong way. This ain't it, chief."

"How can you be so sure? Where's your proof?"

As much as Taichi wished they could just be honest and admit that they'd learned the rules through «Heartseed», doing so was forbidden.

"You don't have proof, either. So stop making other people into your guinea pigs."

"I'm not *making* them do anything. I'm letting them decide for themselves."

At first glance, *personal freedom* seemed like a valid argument, but upon further inspection, it fell apart completely. Not everyone had the same information; not everyone was capable of rational decisions.

"Satisfied? I'll explain it to everyone later." Katori blew off the discussion and headed for the door. "Go ahead and gather people, as we planned," he instructed the outreach committee. "As many as you can get in a timely fashion."

Only then did the four of them finally spring to life.

"S-Sure thing!"

"...Right..."

"O-Okay..."

"Are you guys seriously okay with this?!" Aoki called after them, but their only response was a passing glance. They all dashed out of the room like they couldn't bear to stay for a single second more.

"You really think this is the right thing to do, Fujishima?" Taichi asked. After all, Fujishima was the only one who had yet to speak.

"I'm just... following the president's orders, that's all."

"You saw what happened to those students, didn't you?"

At this, Fujishima shuddered and wiped at her eyes. "Here in this world, I serve the student council president as part of the outreach committee. It's my job."

Whether she was currently under the effects of her phenomenon, it wasn't clear.



The student council summoned all the nearby students to a classroom. Without the aid of the intercom, they only managed to draw in about thirty. Add in the student council and the seven members of the CRC, and that number approached forty.

Taichi recognized most of these people. Nakayama, Setouchi, Watase, Ishikawa, Miyagami, Sone, even Kimura... as well as one Kurihara Yukina standing in the corner, her face as pale as a sheet.

"Yukina! I'm so glad to see you!" Kiriya gushed, stepping away from the CRC to greet her best friend.

"Yeah, I'm here. It's possible Misaki already found her way out of this world... in which case, I'd better go after her."

"No... Yukina, no..."

From a distance, Taichi could see the enthusiasm drain from Kiriya's face in real time.

By the time Nagase finally arrived, she was already up to speed on what was going on.

"Are you sure we shouldn't stop them, Inaba?"

"I considered using force, but if we did, we'd only hurt our image. And if they stop trusting us, we'll be powerless to save them."

All Katori wanted to do was talk, and if everyone else wanted to listen, then there was no clear reason for them to interfere.

Then Katori's speech began, and Kiriya rejoined the group.

"Listen up, everyone. We, the student council, have found a way out of this world."

It was exactly what they wanted to hear most. Instantly, his audience was captivated.

"YES!"

"For real?!"

"Finally!"

“We can get out of here!”

A fiery fervor engulfed the room. Perhaps the CRC had underestimated just how badly the students yearned to go back home. It made sense now, of course, but for the most part, everyone had kept quiet about it in the CRC’s presence. After all the rounds they made, how could they have overlooked something so critical?

Then the room fell silent once more, quietly bubbling with excitement.

“You’ve all heard the stories about people disappearing, right?” Katori asked, the whole room hanging on his every word. “Well, I looked into it. And I’ve discovered the requirements necessary to make it happen.”

From there, Katori explained that if two members of a phenomenon group were to duke it out, they would be freed from the world. He told them about his experiment with the two boys from earlier.

“We still don’t have all the details. It’s possible you don’t need to be in the same phenomenon group for it to work. Or maybe you don’t need to attack each other physically. We’ll keep experimenting until we learn more information.”

From the way he spoke, you’d never think he was suggesting that the students enact violence upon each other.

“All we know for sure is that a fistfight between group members is guaranteed to work.”

“A *fistfight*...?” one of the female students whispered.

“Haven’t you noticed? In this world, we may feel pain, but our bodies don’t actually take damage from anything, including a punch or two. Don’t you think maybe that’s a hint pushing us in this direction?”

It was pure fiction, of course. But one look at the relief on everyone’s faces and it was clear: this was a fiction they needed. All that remained was each individual’s consent.

“But there’s just one problem,” said Inaba Himeko, who had chosen this moment to break her silence.

She had warned them in advance that she would choose the perfect timing to begin her counterargument, and the rest of the club had been waiting with bated breath.

"Just because people are disappearing, it doesn't guarantee that they've *escaped*. We don't know for a fact that they're safe, either."

"Okay then, let's assume for a moment that not everyone who has disappeared from this world is safe. In what way are they endangered? And if they *are* in fact seriously endangered, surely we would know about it by now. At this point, we can't just take rumors as fact."

Despite her counterargument, Katori held his ground. Unfortunately for him, Inaba wasn't done.

"You know, you forgot to mention something about those two boys you mentioned. Right before they disappeared, they both seemed to have forgotten each other completely. Almost like their memories were erased. Or were you planning to keep that part a secret?"

This was an inconvenient truth, and chances were high that Katori had chosen not to mention it on purpose.

"As I was saying, not much is widely known about the rules of this world. Isn't it possible that our memories of the phenomenon will be erased as we transfer back to the real world? That would explain why these supernatural occurrences aren't common knowledge. And perhaps that was why it appeared as though those students had forgotten each other."

"No way. They didn't just 'appear to have forgotten'—they literally *did*. Not only that, but they were emotionally traumatized. That's not a healthy state of being."

"Alright then, I see that you're opposed to my proposal. So, do you have an alternative solution?"

He had placed his full confidence in the method he believed he had discovered. And given that the other students were desperate for a ray of hope, it felt like the crisis was coming to a head.

“There might indeed be a way out. But it’s dangerous to take risks without any concrete proof. Our club has survived these phenomena in the real world, and there was never any special way to escape it. All we could do was lay down some ground rules and stay together. Eventually it *will* end—you can all feel it, am I right?”

That was the correct path.

“But when is ‘eventually’?” asked one of the girls, almost offhandedly.

“One to two weeks, at the absolute most—if we all work together and stick it out. But obviously we won’t just sit around. We can look for other ways out, too.”

Taichi prayed desperately for them to understand that this was the right way to go. He prayed for everyone to believe in them.

“It’s going to be okay. We’ve been through this tons of times before. As long as we all work together, we *will* get through this,” he called brightly.

But Katori shot him down.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

Taichi started to protest, but his desire to do so was quickly extinguished.

The vibes Katori was giving off... No, it wasn’t just him. Everyone in the room was giving him the same vibes—so intense, it threatened to swallow him whole.

“These phenomena are freakish and... *unnatural*,” Katori spat, with more weight than a single person should have been capable of.

They had all accepted the phenomena as a result of the hypnotherapy... but that didn’t change the weight of the phenomena themselves. If anything, it only made it all too easy for the phenomena to gnaw at them.

“You’ve been through this *tons of times*? That’s not possible.”

“We’re not trying to say this is easy. We know everyone’s having a hard time—and we can’t possibly begin to imagine

your suffering. But that's exactly *why* we're proposing this."

"We're all in this together! We can do this!" Nagase shouted, lighting up the room with her sunshine.

Indeed, all they could do was offer light and warmth to those trapped in this world. They couldn't force anyone to do anything; they could only hope that people would turn toward the light of their own accord.

"We'll help you as much as we can!" Kiriya pleaded.

"Let's all band together! Right, kids?" Aoki asked the CRC first-years.

"Right," said Uwa.

"I... I'll do my best!" said Enjouji.

They wanted to show everyone what true unity looked like. What hope looked like. They wanted to bring the power of human connection to the Isolation Zone.

"How am I supposed to believe that?" Katori asked, his words heavier than ever before.

No... they weren't just his.

Confused, Taichi shifted his gaze.

All eyes were on them, boring into their skulls. Their mouths didn't move, and yet they were trying to communicate something.

It was then that Taichi realized: Katori represented the will of the people. He controlled the flow of the current. And his words were theirs, too.

Amid those thirty gazes—those sixty eyes—was there anyone who believed in them?

Surely there had to be at least one person... right...?

Watase, Nakayama Setouchi, Ishikawa, and all their other friends were looking at them anxiously. But they were surrounded by suspicion and doubt, and they couldn't speak up. They could only watch and see for themselves.

Why can't they just trust us?

"We want to get out of here as fast as we can," muttered Nakayama Mariko, gazing into the eyes of her best friend Nagase Iori.

“Seriously, if we don’t escape this phenomenon...”
Setouchi Kaoru mumbled vaguely.

These girls were some of the most patient people Taichi knew. And if even *they* were tired of the Isolation Zone, then surely everyone else was, too.

They should have known that the gradual passage of time would have devastating effects, and yet it completely blindsided them. At this point, no amount of human connection would fix the damage done to their hearts.

With no trace of hope, a dark shadow was threatening to engulf the light.

“I know things are lookin’ real bad, but that’s all the more reason to believe in the power of unity!” Aoki proclaimed desperately.

They couldn’t give up yet. Surely there was still a chance. Surely they could still get through to everyone.

“Yeah!” Kiriya chimed in. “Like, back in the real world, we—”

But then Katori’s eyes glinted sharply, like a wolf catching sight of its next meal.

“Remind me what phenomenon your group has, Kiriya?” he asked her directly.

“Huh? Um... w-we can read each other’s minds. At random,” she replied, restating the cover story they’d agreed upon in advance. But why would he ask her that?

“And the moment it happens, the subject knows exactly what was ‘read.’ Isn’t that how you all said it worked?”

We did? Taichi couldn’t remember any of them ever saying that.

“Wai—” Inaba began, like she’d caught on to something, but it was too late.

“Y-Yeah, exactly.”

“In that case, could you give us an example of something you ‘read’ today? Anything will do,” Katori continued.

“I’ll answer that,” Inaba cut in.

“I didn’t ask *you*, Inaba. I’m asking Kiriya. Now then,

go ahead.”

“Wh-... Why should I have to tell you that?” Kiriyaama stammered, her expression tearful.

“Because I think maybe your club doesn’t actually have a phenomenon at all.”

For the briefest of moments, Taichi’s sight warped from the impact.

“Why would you think that?” Nagase asked, her voice dry.

“Because you’re *too calm*. You’re not suffering at all. You have the mental capacity to focus on other people,” said Katori.

“That’s because... we have experience with these phenomena,” Taichi cut in hastily.

“Yes, you’ve said that. Now then, Kiriyaama... Prove to me that your phenomenon is real.”

“Wh-Why me...?”

“You’re targeting Yui on purpose, aren’t you? You’re disgusting,” Inaba growled through gritted teeth.

“And what about you, Prez? You’ve been doin’ all kinds of stuff for other people. It’s hard to believe *your* phenomenon is real, either,” Aoki shot back stubbornly.

“I’m only doing this because I have no choice. If I didn’t do it, no one else would.”

He had the volatile energy of a cornered animal.

“*No one else?* That’s not true! We coulda done it!”

“*Excluding* the CRC.”

“...Well, okay, maybe everybody else is too busy dealin’ with things. But why do we gotta be excluded, man?!”

“If you don’t want to be excluded, then prove your phenomenon is real. Let’s see... I’ll take one more volunteer in addition to Kiriyaama. Both of you write down some of the mind-reading exchanges you’ve had today, and I’ll contrast them—”

“*Don’t treat us like liars!*” Inaba roared, silencing the room. “It’s despicable.”

She was probably trying to get them out of having to

prove anything.

“Just do it already,” muttered a third party—Miyagami. When everyone turned to look at him, he shook his head and adjusted his rectangular glasses. “Uh, sorry! I just... don’t want us to waste time pointing fingers. And it shouldn’t take too long to prove it.”

Knowing him, he didn’t mean any harm by it... but things snowballed from there.

“Just prove it already!”

“I wanna be done with this!”

“Why are they so quiet all of a sudden?”

“You don’t think...?”

The murmurs spread like wildfire, slowly closing off all exits. Taichi looked at Inaba, but she didn’t have any cards left to play; her gaze flickered to and fro, seeking an answer. So his next thought was to take action himself, but... he didn’t exactly have a master plan up his sleeve, either.

All they could hear was the unintelligible sound of whispering.



They were one step away from plummeting to their doom—but not because of a «Heartseed» or a phenomenon. No, their attackers were fellow human beings. Friends from school. Surely they all shared the same desire to escape the Isolation Zone, and yet...

“So you refuse to give us proof? Because I’m going to take that to mean your phenomenon isn’t real.”

They knew it was their final warning, and yet they couldn’t argue.

“C-Come on, Uwa! You could probably tell him yours, right? Just do it!” Kimura urged Chihiro.

Meanwhile, a different first-year called out to Enjouji: “Enjouji-san!”

“Yui...?” Kurihara’s face was now so pale, she was practically a ghost.

Then Aoki’s friends from class, Katsuragi and Matsui, called out to him:

“Aoki!”

“Aoki-kun...!”

“Tell me it’s not true, Iori,” Nakayama pleaded, her eyes full of tears as she gazed at Nagase.

“I know you’re not the type to lie, Yaegashi,” said Miyagami.

“You’re always honest to a fault. It’s your number one selling point,” said Sone.

“This is all part of your strategy, right, Inaba-san? There must be some reason, correct?” Fujishima asked in a shaky, hopeful voice.

But it was too late.

The door swung open, and a male student walked in. Given the timing, plus the aura he radiated, everyone instantly turned to look... and Taichi probably wasn’t the only one who felt goosebumps prick up his arms. The mood in the room changed instantly.

Could a mere human achieve this effect? No, surely not. But this was no mere human; this was something else

wearing its skin. Something lifeless and lethargic... and decidedly neither «Heartseed» nor «The Second».

“...We were wondering what you were doing in here...” it murmured as it looked directly at Taichi and the others.

One could only guess how this entity must have appeared to the rest of the room, but to the CRC, it looked an awful lot like «The Third».

The other students started to murmur fervently among themselves.

“There’s something off about him...”

“I think maybe I’ve met him before...”

“I know, right? I’ve definitely met him... but it wasn’t *him* at the time...”

“It was right before we came here... and he was explaining it all to us...”

Evidently «The Third» had approached them all directly at some point back in the real world.

“I don’t really understand it, but... I feel like it’s his fault we’re—that I’m—”

“Something tells me we should stay away from him...”

Even without concrete knowledge, deep down, they could all somehow sense its omnipotence. And yet it didn’t pause to acknowledge them at all.

“That said... you weren’t causing much trouble... so we decided your presence was harmless... Entertaining, even... Though we have to wonder how exactly you managed to get in... But this turn of events is entertaining, too...”

This confirmed that «The Third»’s group had indeed turned a blind eye to the CRC thus far.

“However... at this point... all we can do is step back... but before we do that... there’s one last thing...”

Why was it here? What was it after?

Slowly, it raised a hand and pointed at Inaba. At Nagase. At Taichi. At Kiriya. At Aoki. At Chihiro. At Enjouji. Then it turned its head and looked at the rest of the room.

“The reason all of you are here... lies with *them*.”

And that was all it took to turn everything on its head.

Chapter 5: The Catalyst

The CRC clubroom was so gloomy, it was practically a black hole. All seven of them sat in their seats, hanging their heads in defeat.

"Maybe we should've been honest and told them we don't have a phenomenon," Nagase muttered.

"They would've found us suspicious either way," Taichi replied.

"It's my fault," Kiriyama sniffled, her eyes red. "When Katori-kun called on me to answer... I couldn't think of what to say..."

"It's alright, Yui. Anyone would've blanked in your shoes," Aoki reassured her.

But she just shook her head. "I doubt it."

Katori had probably sensed that Kiriyama was the worst at lying and subsequently targeted her on purpose. It was far from the most noble method, but in terms of efficiency, it certainly worked.

"Even if you hadn't frozen up, we were screwed the moment «The Third» walked in the door," said Inaba, and the room fell silent once more.

After those final words, the male student who was being piloted by the entity snapped back to his senses. Judging from this, they were convinced it was «The Third» who had addressed them, although they didn't know for sure.

"About that... So «The Third» knew we were in here, and went out of its way to brag to us about it, but... do you think it knows about our pact with «Heartseed»?" Nagase whispered, as though that would keep the entity in question from overhearing her.

"Frankly, it's hard to say. All we know is that things will

get complicated if it does.”

«The Third» had waltzed in at the worst possible moment. One little comment, and all the trust they’d built up with the other students was utterly destroyed.

After «The Third» made its exit, no one in the room raised their voice against the CRC. Instead, the students all simply stared at them—fearfully, scornfully, reproachfully.

Then Katori asked the room: “Is anyone interested in trying out a fistfight with their group members? The choice is yours.”

After a small pause, several people spoke up:

“Me!”

“M-Me, too!”

“No, pick me!”

“What should we do?”

“Well, it’s better than sitting around, don’t you think?”

“I guess there’s some small chance it’ll work.”

When the CRC tried to dissuade them, their response was:

“If you’re just going to complain, then get out.”

And since no one spoke up to vouch for them, their only choice was to leave. So they retreated to the clubroom, their hearts full of despair.

“...That said, we can’t just throw in the towel,” Taichi muttered, his chest tight, as he thought back to the bleak scene they had just witnessed.

“B-But Taichi-senpai... no one’s going to listen to us anymore,” said Enjouji.

“There may be some who haven’t yet heard the President’s proposal, but word travels fast... At this point, I get the feeling we’ll be fighting an uphill battle,” said Chihiro.

Honestly, Taichi could understand why they weren’t eager to get back out there. Frankly, he didn’t care if the other students chose not to listen—he just didn’t want to have to endure having everyone look at him with such contempt ever again. *Please, no.* The mere memory was enough to sap

him of his courage.

Honestly, a coward like him had no business saying this, but he chose to say it nonetheless:

“Enjouji. Chihiro. I know it’s hard to stay positive when it seems like no one will take our side. But although they may seem like the enemy, when it comes down to it, they’re our friends.”

The people around them weren’t puppets to be controlled. They each had a will of their own, and there was no guarantee their interests would line up with the CRC’s.

“We gotta just keep following our own path. As long as we believe in what we think is right, I’m sure the tides will turn in our favor.”

And so he patched up his holes with flimsy styrofoam. Anything to keep from falling apart.

“That’s kind of a tall order right now, when it feels fucking hopeless,” Inaba replied, laying her emotions bare. “But you’re not wrong. The second we give up, it’s all over... so as long as we keep trying, there’s still a chance.”

Styrofoam or not, she was doing her best to support him.

This was something they needed to keep in mind. Even if the rest of the world turned on them, they still had friends they could believe in. And as long as they had each other, they could keep each other propped up.



The CRC decided to focus on rebuilding the trust they’d lost. At this point, they were in no position to suggest a new management system... but if they turned a blind eye to the situation at hand, it would only fester.

If they could just get a small number of people to stay calm and listen to them, they might be able to convince them. All they needed was a few. Just one or two people to give them the hope they needed to keep going.

To maximize their reach, they split into teams of two. This

time, Taichi was partnered with Aoki. Just two bros, wandering across campus together.

"Feels like we hardly ever get teamed up, huh?"

"I'm sure there's folks I talked to that you never got the chance to, and vice versa. But now we can cover all our bases!"

The school was still quiet, but not quite as deserted as it was this morning. Their first stop: the classrooms on the third floor of the North Wing.

"This is where some girls from my class're holed up," Aoki explained. "They've got a phenomenon where they, uh... they basically turn invisible to the rest of their group."

"Oh, them? Yeah, I've met them."

They were among the first people Taichi encountered back when he first arrived in the Isolation Zone, and they were present for the Katori-CRC argument earlier.

They could hear cheerful voices coming from inside the classroom. Aoki paused to knock, then opened the door. "I'm comin' in!" he declared in his usual carefree tone, and Taichi followed him in.

"Aoki... Yaegashi..."

Instantly, the room fell completely silent.

"What do you want?" asked a hard voice.

The five girls were clearly on edge, but evidently not to the point that they refused to have a conversation at all.

"Oh, we were just wonderin' if we could talk to you. Like, what are your thoughts on the President's idea? Are you on board, or—"

"I think it's worth considering."

"...For real?"

"Yes, for real."

"Setting aside whatever issues you may have with our club, don't you think it's dangerous to go around punching each other?"

"Just stop, Yaegashi. What do you two *actually* want?"

"To *talk*, that's all! Is that cool?" Aoki asked, his laid-back

attitude unwavering. In normal circumstances, he was probably good friends with all of them.

"Frankly, no. I don't want to talk to you," said one, explicitly rejecting them.

"It's *your* fault this is happening to us, isn't it?" said another.

"No! You really think we're this omnipotent?" Taichi argued, though it was a shaky excuse.

"But... you lied to us. You don't really have a phenomenon."

"How are we supposed to trust you now?"

"You're trying to drag this out."

"If you want to stay here longer, knock yourselves out. I don't know what you're after, but we want no part of it. We're getting out of here."

"Even if you don't agree with us, that doesn't mean Katori is right."

"Ugh... We get it, okay? Now go away. We're busy."

"I guess that's the most we can reasonably expect from people right now," Taichi muttered as they walked down the hall.

No matter how badly they wanted to undo the damage, perhaps this was the only outcome they would achieve... barring some kind of dramatic counter-strategy, anyway.

"Those girls especially... They were having a rough time yesterday," Aoki explained slowly, his expression muted.

Even on day one, Taichi had noticed little seeds of discontent planted among them.

"But today, it feels like they're completely united."

Probably because, for the first time, they'd found a ray of hope. Taichi could understand that. But things were progressing in a direction the CRC didn't want.

They arrived outside another classroom.

"This one is home to that one group—the one who sees the people around them as enemies," Aoki explained. "Two

guys, three girls, and they're all on the swim team. Out of the five, three are in my class, and we're pretty close pals."

But when they entered the room, the response was far from welcoming.

"Aoki..."

"Aoki-kun..."

First, they asked the group if they could clear the air about the recent misinformation.

"Isn't there something else you should explain first?" said one of the girls.

"They say you're manipulating things behind the scenes. That you're in cahoots with the mastermind," said another.

"Now hold on a minute. That's completely absurd," Taichi replied, flustered.

"Well, that's what we were told."

"C'mon, Kubozuka, don't buy into these wacky rumors. Hear us out, man."

"You betrayed us. You *lied*. How could we possibly trust you?"

Aoki reeled from the impact. His friend had labeled him a traitor, and it clearly stung.

"What about you, Katsuragi?"

"I know you're a good dude and all, but... I can't. Sorry."

Katsuragi seemed apologetic, but rejected them nonetheless.

"Matsui-san...?"

"Ever since we got here, I know you've been looking out for us and helping us. And I'm pretty sure you did it out of the kindness of your heart."

Finally, someone who understood them.

"But right now... I can't just believe you without the promise of something in return, you know?"

These three students were probably the "close pals" Aoki referred to. They certainly seemed to have an understanding of who he was as a person. But even then, they refused to budge.

"If a fistfight is what it takes to get out of here, then I'm willing to test it out. What about you guys?"

"A fistfight isn't something you *test out*, Kubozuka! It's dangerous, man!" Aoki pleaded.

But his feelings fell on deaf ears.

"The only advice we need is from the student council. Not the CRC."

As they headed down the North Wing staircase, they encountered two girls. On a whim, Taichi called out to them.

"Hey, uh..."

"...Let's go!"

"Right!"

But they dodged around him and ran up the stairs, as if to put as much distance between themselves and the CRC as possible. They had flat-out ignored him.

"Taichi, let's...!" Aoki turned around, but swiftly came to a stop. "Nah, there's no point in goin' after 'em, I guess."

The girls had made their answer clear. Giving chase would only serve to remind them of their powerlessness.

And so Taichi and Aoki continued down the stairs, their legs more leaden than ever. As they walked, they eventually encountered a pair of guys, wandering aimlessly through the darkened halls like a couple of ghosts.

That was when Taichi noticed that the sun was setting. Night was falling.

As he attempted to place where he recognized them from, he realized that they were the two remaining first-years in the Liberation group. There used to be four in total, but two of them vanished shortly after they got here.

Back then, the CRC had asked a lot of them. *Please don't tell anyone they vanished; please don't tell anyone we have experience with the phenomena.* But nevertheless, the boys readily agreed. Chihiro and Enjouji had been checking in with them regularly, but Taichi hadn't seen them in a while.

"Long time no see, I think. You doing alright?" he asked.

"Yeah."

The two boys smiled faintly. Frankly, it was a relief that they were still around.

"It's gotta be hard, stuck in here with the Liberation phenomenon. Especially after two of your friends disappeared and all. I'm really impressed you two are stickin' it out," Aoki told them. He sounded relieved, too.

"We heard you guys have been pulling the strings behind the scenes," one of them said suddenly.

Taichi swallowed.

"And then it all clicked. That's why you asked us to keep quiet about that stuff, right? To keep it all going to plan?"

"Hold on a minute. That's not true."

And yet they couldn't deny that they'd been trying to control the flow of information.

"...And yet, it really does feel like you guys were doing your best to help us."

At least it seemed like the boys had picked up on their sincerity, at least. *Thank god.*

"Not that it matters anymore either way."

"Say goodbye to Uwa and Enjouji-san for us, okay?"

Something wasn't right.

"What's the matter with you guys? You're givin' up?" Aoki asked, his voice trembling.

"We're on our way to talk to the student council."

"About what?" Taichi asked reflexively.

"We're going to ask for permission to have a fistfight so we can get out of here."

"Wha...?! Hold the phone! Where'd this come from all of a sudden?!" Aoki yelled.

"Wh-When the other two disappeared, surely you saw... You saw what happened to Kanda-kun and Horiguchi-kun, right? You really think it's a good thing that they vanished in that condition?" Taichi stammered.

"I dunno, but... it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"If it means we can get out of here..."

"You shouldn't be willing to *punch your friends* to escape. That's messed up," Taichi declared.

But their hearts had frozen over.

"I just can't take it anymore... Eating other people's food... Touching girls without their permission... Breaking windows..."

Taichi thought back to when Chihiro and Enjouji had mentioned that the Liberation boys "weren't doing well." They knew the boys were struggling, and yet they hadn't done a thing.

"I already get in enough fights with this dude as it is," one of the boys continued, pointing at the other. "If all it takes is one final fistfight to make it stop, then it's worth it."

Wham. Out of nowhere, the second boy threw a punch at the first. He stared blankly down at his fist for a moment; then his eyes flew open.

"...Huh?! Oh... The phenomenon triggered, didn't it? Y'know, I've been so eager to hurry up and get it over with, but now that I think about it..."

"We might as well save ourselves the trouble and start now."

Bam. The first boy punched back.

"Good point." With a grin, the second boy threw another punch.

This gruesome scene continued for a few more minutes until at last, the two boys vanished.



It wasn't long before the CRC started to notice an increase in the number of people who outright refused to speak to them. Deep down, they had a feeling it was too late to fix the damage, but they couldn't bear to give up, so they kept trying. And trying. And trying.

Perhaps they were acting purely out of compulsion. They were desperate. They couldn't stop, lest it all come to an

end, so they had to keep going.

And yet, tragically, the negative rumors about the CRC continued to spread.

"It's all their fault."

"They refuse to take the hint."

"They're so annoying."

"Being around them just makes everything worse."

Sometimes the other students said these things right to their faces, and other times they simply overheard them talking to others. And given what these people were comfortable saying in their presence, they could only imagine what sorts of things were being said behind their backs. Everyone in the Isolation Zone was talking about the CRC.

But the hottest topic by far was, of course, the student council president's proposed escape method.

"I heard they actually disappeared."

"Yeah, I kinda feel like Katori's idea is more credible somehow."

"Why won't you do it? It's the only way to make the phenomenon end!"

"Let's just get out of here already! I'm serious! I can't take it anymore!"

"Obviously I'm not excited about it, but... who else is doing it?"

"Somebody do it already!"

And so the negative spiral continued.

Before they knew it, night had fallen, enshrouding the building in darkness. Compared to the previous night, there were far fewer lights on.

Since everyone was going to bed, the CRC was left with nothing else to do... and so they went to bed, too.

It wasn't until much later that they realized no rations had been distributed for dinner that night.



Night turned to day, and the sun rose.

How many people had disappeared over the past two days? Now that the student council was no longer exchanging information with them, the CRC had no way of knowing what the current headcount was... and they didn't have any sources *outside* the student council, either.

According to one broken-hearted Kiriyama, any time she asked a group about their missing members, she was accused of "plotting something." At this point, it was hard to say whether anyone still liked the CRC at all.

That morning, they held a club meeting.

"This is *major* bad news. Remember what «Heartseed» said? We have to unite them or else we're totally screwed," Nagase muttered, her voice full of despair.

"What if we've already let too many people vanish...?" Chihiro mused quietly.

That was the worst possible outcome. If they were already past the point of no return, then all hope was gone, and they were doomed to lose everything.

"What if we play the villain? They already think we're monsters, so let's terrorize them until they band together against us. We'll be their common enemy," Inaba suggested offhandedly.

But as tempting as it sounded...

"We're supposed to unite *everyone*. That includes us," Taichi pointed out.

"How could it possibly include us when we basically had to smuggle ourselves in here? I mean, sure, «The Third» seems to know we're in here, but... Damn it, «Heartseed»! We need answers! Send «The Second» if you have to!" Inaba roared up at the ceiling... and for a moment, Taichi got his hopes up.

Sure, they were nearing the point of despair, but they'd managed to avoid the worst-case scenario each time thus

far, hadn't they? Surely they'd find a ray of hope this time, too.

As Inaba's voice echoed off the walls, Taichi gazed at the clubroom door.

But no one came.

They could stay cooped up in the clubroom and argue themselves hoarse, but it wouldn't change anything. And so the CRC wandered across campus.

Taichi spurred himself on with all his might. *Can't give up. Can't give up. Can't give up. Gotta move forward. Gotta fight.*

This time, they had a new plan. Instead of trying to make everyone listen to them, they were willing to settle for everyone listening to Katori instead. Obviously they were still completely opposed to his methods, but if they could get him to compromise and put the coordinated fistfights on hold for even a short time, then the CRC was more than happy to let him take the lead.

This was all Inaba's idea. She was now so desperate, she was willing to sacrifice her dignity... and this gesture helped boost Taichi's morale.

Each of them had their own role to play, and so they split off. Taichi's task: to travel around campus with Nagase.

They needed to protect as many people as possible from the emergency shutdown. Even just one would do. Anything to cling to the faint hope that «Heartseed» would fix it all in the end.

"Reminds me of our first day here, y'know? At first I was all alone, but then I found you, and then we met up with the others, and then we vowed to unite everyone in the Isolation Zone... Almost like an adventure story!"

"Except we're apparently the villains."

"Villains who fight for world peace, I guess! Haha!"

They knew they were in the right, but they were forbidden from explaining themselves, and so others

misinterpreted them. And those misinterpretations had become the dominant narrative.

None of the people here were evil by intention, but once feelings of doubt and resentment cropped up, those feelings would then seek an outlet. Sometimes the outlet was healthy, and other times it wasn't.

They traveled from the clubroom to the West Wing to the North Wing, moving from room to room to room... but no one was willing to speak with them.

"Sorry, no."

"Go away."

"Just stop."

Again and again, Taichi and Nagase were shot down. It struck them hard, and it stung, but eventually the pain faded, and their only response was a stoic "Okay then."

Slowly but surely, they were... dying inside?

"Moving on... to the East Wing, I guess."

"Right."

And so they cut across the courtyard in the direction of the East Wing. As irony would have it, the sky was bright and clear.

Little was said between them as they carried on with their thankless journey. Taichi knew it would be better for morale if they could talk about something, but his heart was empty, and he didn't have the energy for anything outside of walking to their next destination.

They could hear loud, speedy footsteps in the distance. Someone was running in their direction. Was it one of the other club members? They turned to look.

It was a tall girl with bleached hair—Kurihara Yukina. She looked so teary and panicked, Taichi half-wondered if she was running from someone.

"Y-Yukina-chan?!"

Stunned, Nagase hastily blocked Kurihara's path, and in response, she slowed to a stop, swallowing her saliva and gasping for breath.

“What’s wrong?”

“Two of them vanished.”

Goosebumps shot up Taichi’s arms. The look on Kurihara’s face—her pain, disappointment, grief, and anger—said it all.

“Sakura and Ayane... They got in a big fight over the body-swap. Then they started acting like they’d never met each other, and then they disappeared. No punching or anything—they just *vanished*. Misaki vanished, too, didn’t she? I’m ready to accept it now.”

Once a friendship was lost, the result was an emergency shutdown. Physical fighting wasn’t a hard requirement. Now three of the five body-swap girls had vanished, leaving only two.

“And then... Akemi started telling me to punch her...” As she spoke, Kurihara stared vacantly into space like a broken doll. “She wanted us to punch each other so we could disappear... so we could stop being here... so we could forget... so we could go back to normal...”

“*Yukina!*” a voice called. It was Akemi, the girl with the ponytail. “Let’s just do it already! Aren’t you tired of all this?”

Her voice was calm, but she had a deranged smile on her face.

“I don’t want to punch you, Akemi... We’re friends... We’re *friends*...!”

Kurihara shook her head like she was snapping herself out of a nightmare... then took off running.

But then, someone else called out: “Over here!”

It was the student council president, Katori Jouji. Drawn in by his voice, Kurihara made a hard left and ran into the school building.

“We need to get you away from her, right?”

He grabbed her by the hand and ran off with her. Meanwhile, Akemi gave chase into the school building... and as for Taichi and Nagase, they could only stare dumbfounded as the events unfolded right in front of them.

They had failed to say or do anything to help; instead, Katori swooped in like some kind of superhero to save the day. Was he truly the only person who could save these people? If so, then there was no point in them walking around campus anymore.

They were trying to prevent situations like that one from happening. They wanted to protect people. They thought they were strong enough to save the world... and yet—

Clack!

“Whoa!” Nagase jumped back a couple steps.

Something had landed next to them on the ground—an empty water bottle. They looked up just in time to see a window on the third floor slide shut as a shadowy figure retreated.

Oh. It was on purpose.

But Taichi felt no anger; he simply noted that the harassment was ramping up. He felt vaguely disconnected from the people around him, but this thought evoked no pain. He was putting in so much effort, and yet...

“Why can’t you people just understand?!”

His voice echoed and echoed until all was quiet... and no anger remained.



In a world like this one, perhaps it simply wasn’t possible to bring everyone together.

“We’re united, right?” Taichi asked Nagase.

“Don’t worry... We’re rock-solid,” Nagase declared. At first her tone was uncertain, but by the end, it transformed into her usual reassuring confidence.

As they entered the East Wing, their feet instinctively carried them to 2-B, the classroom they called home. Surely Watase, Nakayama, and their other close friends would be willing to hear them out. Surely they would understand. Even Miyagami and Sone could probably keep their

composure for that long.

With a cloud of despair looming over them and a tiny ray of hope ahead, they stood at the door to the classroom. Promising himself it would all work out, Taichi forced himself to knock.

Inside the room were just four people: Nakayama Mariko, Watase Shingo, Setouchi Kaoru, and Ishikawa Daiki. They didn't shout at Taichi or Nagase to leave; instead, they reacted with "Oh" and "Hey."

Not that there was anything wrong with that, but...

"Are you guys... okay?" Nagase asked timidly.

The mood in the room was utterly miserable. For some reason, each group member was sitting by themselves in a separate corner. This added a great deal of tension to the room, so Taichi decided to ask about it.

There was a pause. But right as he started to think they were ignoring him...

"...Whenever the phenomenon strikes, we're forced to act on it. But if we put enough distance between ourselves, the rest of the group can intervene in time to stop the victim," Watase explained.

Their phenomenon randomly intensified (or diminished) their fondness for each other. And those feelings made them do things they otherwise wouldn't.

"You'd think we'd all split up to different parts of the building or something, but... the phenomenon doesn't go away until it's resolved. Like, if you suddenly hate someone so much you want to punch them, those feelings will be there until you get the chance to act on them in person."

So there was no escaping it. A terrifying phenomenon, indeed.

"...Well, first things first, let's get some air in here!" Nagase exclaimed, and threw open a window. A cold gust rushed into the room. "Now let's all go for a walk! Okay?"

At her suggestion, they all stepped out into the hall—not just Taichi, but Nakayama, Watase, Setouchi, and Ishikawa,

too.

“Whoa... I feel a lot better out here for some reason! You guys feel that?” Nagase remarked cheerfully.

“The environment you put yourself in actually has a huge effect on your mental health. If that environment is toxic, it really takes a toll on you,” Taichi replied.

But no one else joined the conversation—not even Nakayama, who was usually a good sport about these things. Instead, she stared sadly out the window.

This group hadn’t rejected the CRC, and since they were still in their assigned classroom, they hadn’t taken Katori up on his suggestion, either. They were trying their hardest to stick it out.

“Okay, let’s get serious for a minute,” Nagase continued as the cheer left her voice.

The four group members lined up, albeit unevenly. Likewise, Taichi and Nagase stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the other side of the hall, facing them. Nagase looked at Watase, Setouchi, Ishikawa, and Nakayama in turn, but none of them were willing to meet her gaze. Almost like they didn’t care... like they weren’t really present. Or were they suppressing their emotions on purpose?

“Thus far, we haven’t been as honest as we could have been,” Nagase began, adding weight to her words as she tried desperately to reach out. “We lied about having a phenomenon... and we didn’t tell anyone we were being targeted by a supernatural being. And yeah, I understand why everyone wants to get out of here and get away from their phenomena as soon as possible! But we shouldn’t have to hurt each other to do that. We shouldn’t have to lose our memories, even for a second.”

It was obvious Nagase genuinely cared for them. She was doing her best to change the world. To protect it.

“We’re not trying to boss people around, and we’re not trying to rebel against the student council. We just don’t think anyone should hurt their friends in order to escape...

and we hope you can agree with that.”

And yet, for some reason, the words just didn’t land. No one moved a muscle.

It wasn’t Nagase’s fault; the outcome wouldn’t have changed if Taichi was the one to speak. Something was missing.

But then, slowly, Nakayama started to move. She walked past her boyfriend, Ishikawa, her pigtails bouncing. Then she walked past Setouchi. Was her expression feverish, or... lustful? The others all looked at her in confusion as she came to a stop in front of Watase.

Then she reached up—he was a good twenty centimeters taller than her, after all—cupped his cheeks in her hands, and pulled him close. Their lips met.

Everyone froze as if time itself had stopped. Then the clock started ticking once more.

“...Huh?”

The first person to react was none other than the culprit, Nakayama.

“Wait... Wait, wait, wait, wait! WAIT!” she screamed, panicked. She stumbled backwards on legs so shaky, they threatened to give out. “Wait! I take it back! I... uh... Ishikawa-kun...?”

Timidly, she looked up at her boyfriend. Likewise, he turned and looked down at her.

From where Taichi was standing, he couldn’t see Ishikawa’s expression. He could, however, see Nakayama’s... and hers was etched with despair.

“It’s not what you think! I didn’t want to do it! I didn’t enjoy it! But my body wouldn’t stop!”

“Uh, hello? You kissed me against my will! Don’t you think maybe you should apologize?” Watase growled angrily.

Surely he understood it was the phenomenon at work... didn’t he?

“But I... I mean, that was my first...!” Nakayama broke down sobbing.

“Oh my god, she’s *so* annoying. Right, Ishikawa-kun?” Setouchi scoffed, pressing her body against his.

What was happening? Obviously the phenomenon had struck again, but in what way? Which of Setouchi’s feelings had been altered? And why now, of all times? Was it truly random chance, or... had something decided to go on the offensive?

A disgruntled Watase stood with his arms folded. Setouchi and Ishikawa were snuggled against each other. And as for Nakayama... her legs looked like they might give out at any moment.

“I didn’t want to do it! Honest! Just forget what happened... please...” she whimpered down at the floor. “I’m so sick of being here... I just want to forget it all and go back to normal...”

“Well then, want me to punch you? That’ll make it end, right?” Setouchi offered.

Not even Nakayama’s group was immune to despair. Just then, someone came down the stairs.

“Uhh... what’s going on?” It was Shiroyama Shouto, from the jazz band. “I heard shouting, so I... Huh?”

His eyes widened, and Taichi realized he was probably... no, *definitely* looking at Setouchi. After all, she was his girlfriend... and right now, she was hanging all over Ishikawa.

“...No! It’s not what you think!”

She snapped back to her senses and stepped away from Ishikawa. Likewise, Ishikawa did the same. That would indicate he’d been affected by the phenomenon, too.

“L-Look, Shiroyama-kun, don’t jump to any weird conclusions, okay? This is just how our phenomenon works! I mean, I’m sure you understand, and I know you wouldn’t get mad at me over it—”

“Y-Yeah, of course not. I *hate your guts*.” A few seconds passed, and then Shiroyama realized what he’d said. “Th-That was *my* phenomenon! Okay, uh, let’s both agree not to

take it personally!”

Shiroyama’s phenomenon: lying at random.

“...Yeah, I know. You told me about how your phenomenon works. And I know you didn’t mean it, but I just... really can’t take it right now.”

A tear rolled down her cheek... and a moment later, she took off running.

“S-Setouchi-san?!”

Shiroyama went after her. Meanwhile, Nakayama staggered off in the opposite direction.

“N-Nakayama-chan! Hold up!” Nagase called after her. But Nakayama broke into a run and didn’t look back.

They were falling apart.

Looking at this scene in a vacuum, it might look like a minor argument. But those “minor” incidents had the potential to be permanently damaging. And here in the Isolation Zone, each individual lost friendship pushed everything further towards destruction.

But honestly, maybe the real world worked like that, too. Maybe *everything* was built on a foundation of minor incidents. And if even one of those tiny pieces went missing, cracks would start to form, until eventually...

“Let’s just end it already,” Watase sighed, slumping his shoulders.

“If we punch each other, we’ll disappear, correct?” Ishikawa asked, staring down at his clenched fist.

“Guys, c’mon, stop!” Nagase called out in a shaky voice.

The world was barreling toward destruction. Its foundation was breaking down. And there was nothing they could do to stop it. Why couldn’t they solve the problems happening right in front of their faces? Why didn’t anyone understand? Why couldn’t they change people?

Taichi had vowed to change the world. To unite the world. And he would start with Watase Shingo and Ishikawa Daiki.

Who said they couldn’t solve this problem? Sure they

could. Surely Taichi was capable of stopping one measly fight between two of his friends, wasn't he? He could start by talking them down, or if worse came to worst, he could stop them by force.

It felt like something was just barely within his reach. Something critical to changing the world. All he needed now was a flash of inspiration, a gut feeling, anything. He just needed to follow his heart. And in doing so, he could touch someone else's heart. He could move people. He could change people.

But how exactly could he achieve that effect in a situation like this one? He could pause to think about it, but that would take time. Time he didn't have. All he could do was... be himself. Because that was something no one else could do.

Then an idea hit him.

Would it work out? Probably. After all, it wasn't the action itself, but the feelings behind it that mattered. And he knew that for a fact, thanks to one little moment he'd witnessed.

Hadn't Inaba kicked Aoki on their first day here?

"Nagase! Punch me!"

"Okay! Wait, WHAT?! Why would I do that?!"

He didn't blame her for being confused. He sent her a look—a look that spoke louder than words.

"...Well, okay then!"

He somehow doubted she truly understood his intentions. She was probably just playing along for the hell of it. But she would never agree to something like this unless she trusted him completely.

"Watase-kun! Ishikawa-kun! Watch closely, now! Hi-yah!"

And then—Nagase—hit Taichi—as hard as she could—with a palm thrust—to the face.

"Guh!"

He stumbled backwards and slammed full-force into the wall.

"...Damn it, that freaking HURTS! You really need to learn

how to rein it in, Nagase! This same thing happened when you hit Setouchi, too! It's not a slap if you put your hips into it!"

"Well, I've never been in a real fight before, so I didn't know!"

Considering she had no experience, her form was *superb*. Clearly she had some latent talent for it.

"Ow, my back... Other than that, I think I'm okay, though."

His face and lower back still ached, but the pain was quickly receding. This was perhaps the only upside to being in the Isolation Zone.

"...The hell are you doing?" Watase and Ishikawa asked in perfect unison. Judging from the looks on their faces, they were both utterly flabbergasted.

Looks like I got them on the same page after all... Okay, maybe not. Still, the fact remained that they had stopped fighting. And who could blame them, after the spectacle they just witnessed?

There was no persuasion or debate required. Just two friends taking action.

Now began the next battle: Yaegashi Taichi versus Watase Shingo and Ishikawa Daiki. He was done making careful, calculated moves. He didn't need them.

"What I'm asking is—do you really think you'd be happy, escaping from your troubles by slapping your friends around?"

"You literally just did the same thing," Watase promptly pointed out.

"No, that... that was just a little performance piece to get you to stop."

"Aren't you both going to disappear, now that Nagase hit you?" Ishikawa asked.

"Hell no. We're not going anywhere," Nagase declared firmly. "You know why? Because one little smack isn't enough to break our bond."

When it came down to it, all that mattered here in the Isolation Zone was the connection of hearts. Ishikawa and Watase had no way of knowing the exact rules behind it, but surely they must have sensed it somehow.

Watase scratched his head. "I don't even know what to say to that... What are you guys trying to do, anyway? If you wanna talk to me, I'm willing to hear you out."

"We want everyone to band together and support their friends. In your case, not just Nakayama and Setouchi, but everyone around you. Miyagami, Sone, Fujishima... and the whole student council, too."

"How come?"

He could always give a rational answer to this question. He'd have to be careful about not saying too much, of course, but now that «The Third» had actively interfered, maybe it was high time they fired back. And a rational answer was the sort of answer he could give to anyone.

But would a boilerplate response mean anything to Watase Shingo and Ishikawa Daiki?

"Watase... please just do as we ask, okay?"

"Okay, but how come?"

Having settled on his answer, Taichi looked Watase dead in the eyes and said: "Once we go back to the real world, I'll go all-out and play Cupid for you and Fujishima."

There was an absurdly long pause—the kind of pause that hadn't really happened much here in the Isolation Zone. It wasn't awkward, but it wasn't peaceful, either. The mood in the air was... oddly tense.

Ten seconds went by, then twenty, then thirty... Okay, maybe it wasn't that long. Watase took a long, slow breath, then asked:

"You, the guy who's really stupidly ridiculously close to her for no reason?"

"Wow, three whole adverbs. Anyway, yeah."

"You, the same guy who sat on the sidelines like an asshole and told me there was 'basically nothing you could

do'?"

"You seriously thought I was being an asshole? Okay, well, yeah."

"...Do you have a specific plan in mind?"

"Not right this second, no. But I promise I'll come up with something awesome. Hell, I'll ask Inaba to help out."

"I-Inaba's gonna help, too?!"

Watase folded his arms in contemplation and closed his eyes. There was another long pause. And then...

"Alright, I'm in."

"Excellent."

And so a deal was struck with Watase.

"...Are you sure about this, Watase? I thought you wanted to disappear."

"What? The hell are you talking about, Ishikawa?"

Yaegashi's support is the missing link I need to make Fujishima-san mine, and now I finally have a shot at getting it! What kind of moron would say no?"

"I feel like you're really overestimating what it is you're missing... I understand how serious you are about her, but are you really going to let that influence your decision...?"

"Whoa, so Watase-kun's actually serious about Fujishima-san?" Nagase asked.

"You didn't know?" Taichi replied, surprised. After all, she seemed like the type to have a sixth sense for crushes.

"Well, I didn't think anyone saw her as... you know... a normal person."

"I admit, she does seem kind of superhuman..."

"You're all blind. She may be brilliant, but she *clearly* wants to be treated like any other girl... I think!"

"You *wish*, more like."

"Oh, suddenly this is a joke to you?!"

"What about you, Ishikawa?" Taichi asked, turning to Ishikawa.

If they thought this was over, they were sorely mistaken.

"Back in the early days of your relationship, when things

were still awkward, we helped you and Nakayama go on a date, didn't we? I mean, it was originally Kurihara's idea, but Inaba and I went out of our way to pitch in."

Taichi chose his words carefully to appeal to Ishikawa's strong sense of integrity.

"I remember you thanked me, but you never actually *repaid* the favor, now did you?"

Strong as in really strong.

"...What would you have me do?"

Really, really strong.

"Just trust us."

Really, really, really strong.

"...Fine, I'll trust you."

And so a pact was formed with Ishikawa('s guilty conscience).

After that, Taichi was repeatedly accused of "bribery," a charge he couldn't exactly deny, since... you know... it was essentially true. All he could say in response was "Don't forget our agreement!"

But this request had no real weight behind it. There was no guarantee that they would hold up their end of the bargain... and if they didn't, he was in no position to complain. Nevertheless, Taichi chose to have faith in his friends, even if they weren't completely convinced. This was Watase Shingo and Ishikawa Daiki, after all. Taichi was confident that they'd keep their word.

"Y'know, after everything that's been said and done, this is the first time since we got here that I've actually felt like it's safe to get my hopes up."

"Hmm... If it doesn't work out this time, it'll be devastating."

As Watase and Ishikawa mused to themselves, Taichi felt the pressure sink in.

"Anyways, we need to find Setouchi and Nakayama. Real men don't sit around and wait!"

"So far I haven't been a very good boyfriend, but I plan to

change that.”

With that, the two guys set off down the hall.

“You know what to do once you find them, right? I’m counting on you!” Nagase called after them.

“Of course,” Ishikawa replied.

“Oh, right. One last thing, Yaegashi,” Watase said suddenly, his back still turned. “Considering what we’re dealing with here, there’s no guarantee I can keep my word. Our agreement might get flushed down the drain.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“But I swear I’ll try my best... *Hey!* I get that you’re worried about your girlfriend, but don’t just walk off without me, Ishikawa!”

And so the two friends disappeared down the stairs.

“...Taichi, I think you’re on to something. Y’know, it’s funny... I know for a fact that we’ve been going about this the wrong way, but I can’t really find the words to explain how.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to explain. It’s like, *who were we trying to convince?*”

They wanted everyone to understand them. Again and again, they put this thought into words. But looking back... who did they mean by “everyone”?

In this case, “everyone” meant Watase, Ishikawa, Nakayama, and Setouchi.

Up until now, the CRC was so preoccupied with “saving the world” that they had thought of “everyone” as the entire population. But the population of the Isolation Zone was *not* a single monolithic entity. It was made up of individuals — people with their own thoughts and opinions. So it was really no wonder that their strategy didn’t work when it was predicated upon painting everyone with the same brush. If they weren’t paying attention to each individual they spoke to, then they weren’t paying attention at all.

Sure, perhaps it was possible to forcibly take control of a monolith... but with broad, sweeping platitudes, very few

would actually care about their message. In what world would a generic, boilerplate response have an emotional impact? They couldn't connect to people's hearts with that. No one would unite around it.

How could they have deluded themselves into thinking they understood everyone's feelings when "everyone" was an unidentified mass? There was no "one size fits all" solution. They needed to connect with each person on an individual level. Otherwise they would never be able to bring everyone together, change minds, and unite the world.

Hadn't he only just come to terms with the importance of individual connections? It wasn't enough to simply tell himself he understood; he needed to reach out and make sure that understanding was mutual. He needed to connect with the person right in front of him.

Maybe he couldn't unite the entire world population, but surely he could get through to *one* person, right? Not like any of these people were strangers, after all. He had an established rapport with each of them. To the rest of the world, it might look like nothing, but what they had built between them was irreplaceable.

In focusing on the abstract, he had lost sight of the tangible.

Changing the world meant changing society. Changing society meant changing minds. And changing minds couldn't happen without an emotional connection. Reaching out. Resonating with them. Hadn't the phenomena taught them just how unshakeable those bonds could be?

As Taichi stumbled his way through his thoughts, Nagase listened intently. She really seemed to understand.

"Yeah... It's not about literally *everyone*, when you think about it. Really, it's about Nakayama-chan and Kaoru-chan." She looked back at him, her eyes full of quiet determination. "The problem is, we're only close with a handful of these people. I'm not sure how we can really approach the ones we

don't know too well, y'know?"

"Oh... Good question..."

"Er, sorry to be a buzzkill! Anyway, I'm sure this is exactly what we need to make a comeback! Now then, we should let everyone know!"

This time, "everyone" meant the CRC; it was obvious from context and the way she said it.

And deep down, Taichi hoped more people would find strength in their "everyone" the same way Nagase did.

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Talking with Taichi just now was like a punch in the face. Not that I'd given up or anything, but man, I was really starting to think this was impossible. Turns out, no, it wasn't. We were only just getting started.

Taichi and I had agreed to gather the whole CRC together for a discussion, but there was something I needed to take care of first. Assuming Watase-kun and Ishikawa-kun hadn't already handled it, of course.

Where? Where are they? I ran around the whole school, all the way to the back of the North Wing.

"AHA! Found you! Wait... Nakayama-chan, Kaoru-chan, *and* Shiroyama-kun?! What are you three doing together?!"

Worse still, Watase-kun and Ishikawa-kun were nowhere to be seen. I guess they were out searching somewhere else.

The three of them were standing in a triangle formation, and as I barged in on them, they all looked at me in alarm.

"...What are you doing?"

Their little triangle was a little *too* perfectly spaced. It looked like they were planning to... do something... involving their fists... I shuddered at the thought.

I didn't know how they'd arrived at this conclusion, but one thing was for sure: Nakayama-chan, Kaoru-chan, and Shiroyama-kun were all kind-hearted people. None of them truly wanted to hurt each other. I knew that for a fact.

"Iori... I..." Nakayama-chan looked at me, terrified.

"Guys, c'mon! Don't give up! I'm begging you, please, stay here and fight your phenomena as a group. And here's why I think you should listen to me."

None of them seemed to know how to respond to this.
Now's my chance.

First up, Nakayama. Back when the Sentiment Transmission had completely destroyed my mental health, she never stopped reaching out to me. She was a total extrovert who could get along with anyone, male or female, but when it came to dating, she was super shy.

"I get it, Nakayama-chan. Not only are you trapped here, but some jerk is playing around with your feelings. I'd be sick of it, too, if I were in your shoes. But..."

Honestly, I should've spent more time thinking this through, but oh well. I'll just have to wing it!

"You can't find true love unless you overcome its trials! Your love is being tested!"

"M-My love...?"

Nakayama-chan was a pure-hearted, sappy romantic... just like Setouchi Kaoru.

Kaoru-chan had the tendency to be easily influenced by her crush. But she wasn't good at expressing her feelings, and because of that, her emotions would sometimes get the better of her. She was a sweet, selfless girl who would do anything to help the person she loved, even if that person didn't love her back.

"I'm talking to you, too, Kaoru-chan!"

"C-Come again?!"

Lastly, Shiroyama-kun. He used to have a crush on me—until I shot him down like a complete monster. But once I apologized for my attitude, he was somehow willing to forgive me and accept my friendship. That was proof of just how big-hearted he was. In all my life, I would probably never meet a guy as kind and earnest as the Little Prince.

"You, too, Shiroyama-kun!"

“M-Me?!”

“Guys, don’t let this break you! Remember when Shiroyama-kun asked me out, and I said no? Kaoru-chan got so mad, she tried to wreck my whole club!”

“Wha...?! I... I’m sorry, okay?! It was the worst mistake of my life, I swear!”

“And that ‘mistake’ brought you and Shiroyama-kun together. But if you want this relationship, then you’re going to have to work for it! Being trapped here is no excuse! You still have to put the effort in!”

“Uhh... well, okay... I mean, you’re not wrong...”

“And you, Shiroyama-kun! The second Kaoru cut and dyed her hair, you were ready to drop me like a hot potato!”

“Urk...!”

“If you truly have feelings for her, then prove it!”

Not that I have any room to talk, but I digress!

“I love you guys, and I *know* you can do this! Nakayama-chan, you’re my best friend! Kaoru-chan, I’m amazed at what good friends we’ve become! And Shiroyama-kun, I feel like we’ve gotten to know each other a lot better, too!”

I poured my heart out to them.

“I love you, so I *need* you to stay here! Please, help me believe in the power of love! It’s the only thing that will get us through this! Wouldn’t that be totally dreamy?! Let me see your fairytale romance!”

I blurted it all out without letting them get a word in edgewise.

Nakayama-chan stared at me for a moment.

“Iori... what’s gotten into you?”

Noooo! C’mon, don’t take it seriously! I’m gonna die of embarrassment!

“So basically, you want us to band together and endure the phenomena. That’s no different from everything you said before.”

She was right, of course. Nothing I said was groundbreaking. I changed up the words, but not the

underlying message.

“But for some reason, it feels... *different*,” Shiroyama murmured, puzzled. “Like it’s really hit me this time.”

“Yeah... I’m starting to think I should actually try,” Kaoru-chan nodded.

“You wanna see the power of love?! Because ol’ Mariko-san will show you the burning flames of passion!” Nakayama-chan declared.

I had followed my heart, and now my friends were inspired to follow theirs.

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I made a beeline straight to the swim team — the same folks who wouldn’t give me the time of day yesterday.

“Honey, I’m home!”

No more Mr. Nice Guy. I threw open the door and barged right in.

Back at the CRC clubroom, after listening to Taichi and lori-chan, it woke me up. They were right — I was starting to think maybe getting everyone on board with us was just a pipe dream. In a situation as serious as this one, there was simply no way that my unfailing optimism would solve everything.

But if it was just a few people, maybe my “don’t think; *feel*” schtick could actually work!

Inside the clubroom, I found Kubozuka, Katsuragi, Matsui, and the other two girls. First off, it was a relief to see that nobody had vanished. Then I asked them to believe in us one more time.

But of course, it would’ve been silly to expect different results by doing the exact same thing.

“We already had this conversation with you yesterday,” snapped Matsui. Last time she tried to be nice about it, but today she didn’t bother hiding her anger. *Wait, c’mon, don’t get mad at me!*

"Yesterday, you said you needed 'the promise of something in return' before you could believe me. So that's just what I'll do!"

Please just smile. Things'll be so much easier that way.

"You guys wanted to hear the juicy details about my relationship with Yui, right?!" I shouted, and in my mind, I added a *BOOM* sound effect in the background.

"Most days I'm everyone's favorite punching bag, but when push comes to shove, I know how to man up! Aren't you curious what it must be like for Yui, havin' to date me and all?!"

Real talk, I got this question all the time. But you see, I'd decided I wouldn't answer it without Yui present. She was a super private person about that sorta stuff, and I didn't want to embarrass her.

"...That's what you're offering us in exchange?"

Uh oh. Katsuragi's rolling his eyes.

"That's right! I remember both you *and* Kubozuka asked me for deets at one point!"

"I mean, yeah, but..."

"Is KiriYama-san okay with it?" Matsui asked.

Technically... no, I hadn't asked Yui for permission, but...

"Don't worry! She'll understand that I didn't have a choice. That's just the kinda girl she is!"

I was fully confident in that statement. Our relationship was so magical, even our friends drew strength from it!

"So, will you trust us? I'll even swear on my love for Yui!"

"What? No, seriously... what does that have to do with literally anything?"

"I don't know... I think it carries a lot of weight, coming from Aoki of all people..."

"Yeahhhh... This is the same guy who hasn't shut up about KiriYama-san since the first day of high school!"

Am I doing the right thing here? Well, if it's getting through to them, then I guess so!

"So you're saying you'll trust me?!"

"Welllll... I mean..."

One more push! I got this!

"Come to think of it, Kubozuka, I heard you got a girlfriend these days! Is she in here with us?!"

"No, which is why I wanna get out of here. Well, that, and other reasons too, obviously..."

"Then why take the coward's way out?! Why not fight your way through it like a badass and make her swoon?!"

See that? The thing about love is, it can brighten up even the darkest days!

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Man, a guy like me doesn't belong up here.

I stood at the teacher's lectern, getting ready to address my peers for the first time since... the Sports Festival, I think? Looking back, I think that was the one and only time I ever put myself in the spotlight. And I wouldn't say it was a roaring success.

There were fourteen people in the room, all of them fellow classmates in 1-B. This included Kimura, Shimono, Tada, and two other girls who comprised the "giving orders at random" phenomenon group. In the wrong hands, that kind of power could be downright terrifying.

Incidentally, I was joined by one Enjouji Shino, though there was no telling whether she'd actually be of any use to me up here. I admit, Taichi-san's idea made some amount of sense, but I wasn't sure whether we could make it happen.

"...Basically, we came by to say that we really think we should all band together and stick it out to the bitter end," I told them, repeating the same talking points everyone else had made thus far.

"...Okay, but seriously, how the hell are you people so calm right now?" Shimono demanded. Then he backed away slightly, as if he wasn't already standing on the opposite side of the room. *Coward.*

“Is it true you guys are pulling the strings behind the scenes?” Tada asked.

I would’ve thought these people would understand by now, seeing as we’d come to this classroom multiple times in the past, but apparently the student council’s rumor had flushed all our hard work down the crapper.

But this was my chance to try again. To look at each person, at the connections we’d built together, and truly talk to them. I was no social butterfly, but after the Sports Festival, I’d gotten to know quite a few of my classmates. In fact, it was safe to say that Shimono and Tada (and Kimura?) and I were officially friends now. Surely we... Surely I...

Wait, so what am I supposed to say?

I was so sure I’d think of something. That I’d find my words naturally. After all, it’d worked for the rest of the CRC, hadn’t it? I was convinced I could do it, too. And yet... it just wasn’t that easy to come up with a good idea.

Fuck.

I looked at Enjouji.

“We’re not doing anything bad,” she whimpered weakly.

God, you’re so useless. Almost as useless as me.

“Your whole club is really weird, actually. Is that just what happens when you join the CRC? Because you two never used to be this weird!” Kimura complained.

Because we were in the CRC, we were treated as outsiders. So... what if we *weren’t* in the CRC? If our affiliation was making this complicated, then we could simply discard it. But... I was scared to pull the trigger. I was only here as a CRC representative — a stand-in for my senpai. Could I really stand before them as Uwa Chihiro instead?

Then it hit me. Even now, I *still* hadn’t come to terms with who I was as a person. Instead, I was trying to make the CRC my entire identity. How could I ever understand other people when I couldn’t even face myself? A real confrontation couldn’t happen unless *both* parties let themselves be

vulnerable. Could I do that? If I let my walls come down, I could get a better look at them, too... right?

I snuck another glance at Enjouji. She looked helpless and scared... in other words, a perfect mirror of myself. But did I really need to hide it?

"Guys, do you seriously think this wimp could pull *any* kind of strings? Seriously, look at her. It's *Enjouji*. Forget about all the CRC stuff and just look at her."

As I spoke, I patted her on the back.

"Huh?! Uhhh... ummm... Y-Yeah, I really don't think I could manage something that complicated, to be honest!"

"I think that's the most confident you've ever sounded in your life."

At that, someone let out a chuckle, and it occurred to me: Wasn't this how we convinced them last time, too? Not by acting suave, but by screwing up and making fools of ourselves. In which case, maybe this was the perfect opportunity.

"O-Oh yeah? Well, what about you? You're so clueless, you couldn't find your way out of a paper bag, Chihiro-kun!" Enjouji shot back.

"Yeah... I just can't picture it," someone muttered.

Damn it, Enjouji, you always have to steal my thunder.

"When you think about it, we're not talking about 'the CRC.' We're talking about Enjouji-san and Uwa-kun, you know?"

"Yes, exactly! Thank you, Tomomi-chan and Higashino-san!"

"Yeahhhh... There's no way they're the secret masterminds behind all this..."

"Enjouji-san's too nice, and Uwa-kun's a hapless buffoon."

"Looks like they've realized you're nowhere near as cunning as you look! This is great news, Chihiro-kun!"

"Ladies, come on, cut me some slack! You too, Enjouji!"

What are you harpies squealing about? Not that I'm complaining, but... okay, I'm complaining a little!

Meanwhile, Shimono and Tada were talking amongst themselves:

“Yeah, when you think about what these two are capable of...”

“...It doesn’t really click, does it?”

“I know I just got done saying ‘they never used to be this weird,’ but now that you mention it... maybe they really *were* this weird the whole time?! Why didn’t anybody tell me?!”

“Kimura, I need you to put a sock in it, pronto.”

But I didn’t feel the need to put on an act. Forget all my aspirations about catching up to my senpai and “earning” my place in the CRC — I could just be myself. I was nobody special, but... apparently I didn’t need to be.

“Okay, so we’re all in agreement that there’s no way Enjouji and I could’ve actually arranged all that stuff the student council president was talking about, right?! Now then, don’t you think maybe you could hear us out?!” I shouted.

Everyone in the room nodded — even Enjouji.

...Well, everyone thinks I’m a moron, but at least this is a start... I guess.

+++

Everyone had gone off on their own to talk to their friends. Functionally it was no different from yesterday’s activities, but this time it carried a new significance. Our new plan: to capitalize on our interpersonal relationships. This was the strategy we’d discussed and agreed upon after Taichi had told us his idea.

Honestly, I should have known he’d think of something like this... and I couldn’t be prouder to call myself his girlfriend.

We wanted everyone to understand us, and we took action to try to make it happen. In my opinion, that was still

ultimately the right move. Our problem was that we lacked the charisma necessary to connect with an entire population. However...

"When you set your sights on just one person, it suddenly gets a lot easier," I muttered to myself as I looked my target in the eye.

"...What are you talking about?" asked the leader of the student council outreach committee, Fujishima Maiko, her expression dubious.

If there was one person who stood a chance of helping us change the world, it was her.

"Aren't you paying attention, Fujishima Maiko?"

"First you ask to speak with me in private, and now you're accusing me of not paying attention? Do you realize what lengths I went to to sneak out here behind the school without the President noticing?"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, Fujishima Maiko. Why the hell have you turned into Katori's little sheep?"

Granted, Katori Jouji was unquestionably a key player here in the Isolation Zone. He had won support from a majority of the population, and his words carried weight. But as much as I would've liked to put him to work for us, he was now fully convinced we were the enemy. That made him very difficult to manipulate.

No matter what we said to other people, Katori would come along and turn the whole thing on its head. And since our extremely public defeat the other day, no amount of "he said, she said" would work out in our favor; most people would believe him over us.

So, in order to make a comeback, we'd need help from someone outside the club. Someone who could easily go toe-to-toe with Katori. And who better than the hyper-competent superwoman standing right in front of me? I was confident that she could take him down. All I needed was to win her over.

"His sheep? Well, he *is* the leader around here, so in that

sense, yes, I am his follower. What of it?"

"You're just going to accept it? You don't have any issues with how Katori's choosing to run things?"

For a split-second, her smile stiffened.

"The fact is, the President's found a way out of here. He's done exactly what everyone else expected of him. It's impressive, really."

"This situation is *extremely fucking precarious*, Fujishima. And I know you see it, too. You saw those boys punch each other. They broke down completely, and at the very end, they lost their memories of each other. The student council is supposed to *protect* these people! Are you really going to sit back and let them do this to each other?"

She averted her eyes without protest.

"You know we wouldn't push back against it without good reason, right?"

"It seems you all have a very high opinion of yourselves."

"Oh yeah? Then why is your voice shaking?"

She pursed her lips together. Her widened eyes looked rather damp. Where was her backbone, damn it? Why had she turned into some helpless damsel, right when her people needed her more than ever?

Looking back, however... Brilliant, charismatic negotiator though she was, whenever a problem arose that mere negotiation couldn't solve, she stayed out of it completely. I'd assumed she simply wasn't involved, but... maybe she was avoiding those conflicts on purpose. Maybe that was as far as Fujishima Maiko was willing to go.

There was no point to dancing around the issue.

"You like to stick your head in the sand whenever there's a big problem, don't you?"

"Excuse me? I... I simply prefer to focus on areas where I can get results. If I can't be completely certain I can manage something, then I'd rather leave it to someone more fitting for the role."

"Great. Don't tell me *you're* a perfectionist, too."

"In addition to whom, pray tell?"

Nagase Iori, I replied silently.

"You could afford to take center stage more often, you know. It's okay to make mistakes."

"Not right now, it isn't."

I was right. They're identical.

"You're just trying to minimize your personal responsibility by reducing yourself to a bit part. Knock it off."

"...You certainly don't mince words, do you?"

Her expression was tinged with anger. Perhaps I'd pushed her a little too far. In all sincerity, I didn't come here to pick a fight with her, but I needed her to wake up.

"We can't do this on our own. We can't stop Katori, and we can't change their minds," I told her. I hadn't given up completely, mind you, but I was out of ideas. "You're our only hope, Fujishima. Please. Put an end to Katori's risky experiments and knock some sense back into everyone."

The two of us had a mutual respect for one another, but we weren't exactly friends... and yet our bond was too deep for mere classmates, either.

"I... I'm not superhuman, you know."

It wasn't an outright no; it was an admission of weakness.

"...Alright."

Maybe this wasn't going to work. Even if I did get through to her, it would be incredibly irresponsible of me to dump the work entirely on her shoulders.

"Just give it some thought."

Is this where our luck runs out?

+++

Up ahead, I spotted someone sitting on the edge of the planter box, slumped over like a wilted flower, staring blankly at nothing. The blood drained from my face, and I totally thought I was going to pass out.

“Yukina!”

I ran right over to her. Even though she treated me like a little kid from time to time, she was my best friend, and I loved her with all my heart.

“...Yui...”

She looked up at me lifelessly. Her tears had long since dried.

It tore me apart to see her so defeated.

“...They told me Akemi vanished,” she muttered in a quiet, monotone voice.

“Akemi-chan? Wasn’t she the only other track girl left...?”

The track girls had been dealing with the body-swap phenomenon since before we came to the Isolation Zone... and now Yukina was the only one left?

“She asked me to punch her. To make her disappear. But I couldn’t do it.”

“...Then how did she vanish?”

“She got in a fistfight with someone else, apparently. I guess it doesn’t have to be with a friend.”

I got the sense that the actual trigger behind the emergency shutdown was the emotional breakdown part, and/or the friendship-ending part. But physical fighting probably led to those things regardless.

“I tried to stop her, you know? I ran from her... Oh, but now that she’s gone, I’m free from the body-swap. After all, there’s no one left to switch with.” She let out a self-deprecating laugh and smiled sadly. “Maybe I should vanish, too. Once I wrap up all my loose ends.”

“No, you shouldn’t! You have to hang in there, Yukina! I... I’m too scared... I don’t want you to lose all your memories...”

“What’s the point of me ‘hanging in there’ all by myself? What’s the point of me keeping my memories when everyone else has already forgotten me?”

I had to admit, she had a point. If she lost her memories of me, then it wouldn’t matter if I kept my memories of her.

Either way, we wouldn't be friends anymore.

I paused to imagine what it would be like if Aoki forgot all about me. If he stopped telling me he loved me, would we still be together? If my feelings were there, but his were gone, what would we have left?

But there were no mysterious enemies here — just my best friend who I knew better than anyone. Nothing could come between us.

In my mind, I thought about the CRC. With their help, I could believe in the power of friendship.

"Listen to me, Yukina. Are you *sure* you want to sacrifice your memories of your friends just so you can disappear? Are you really okay with losing those friendships?"

"What friendships? Like I said, there's no point in me remembering when they don't! But... at least I still have you, so I guess it doesn't really—"

WHAP. The light, airy sound echoed louder than I was expecting.

For what was probably the first time in my life, not including karate matches, I had struck one of my female friends.

For a second Yukina looked shocked, but then she laughed. "What was that for? Are you going to erase me yourself? I'd appreciate it, actu—"

"Is that really all they ever meant to you, Yukina?!" I roared, letting out all my feelings.

Honestly, it was a pretty risky move, since emergency shutdowns were so closely tied to emotional distress and all that. But I felt certain that nothing bad would happen.

"Once someone forgets you, you think that makes it okay to toss them away?!"

I thought back to the past. Dozens of memories sprang up in my mind like daisies.

"You and I would always eat lunch together, but sometimes Misaki-chan would join us. And sometimes, like, we even hung out with the rest of the track team, whenever

we could fit it in around their busy schedules! We went to karaoke, we went shopping, we went out for ice cream... Without you and Misaki-chan, I never could've made friends with them! Do you know how grateful I am?!"

I couldn't stop myself.

"We had so much fun together! I was never any good at gossiping about boys, and talking about love stuff was always, like, so awkward for me, but looking back, I really enjoyed it! And... there's still so much I want to do! I want to spend the whole next year hanging out with all of you, right up until we graduate! But if you forget everyone, then we can't! So is that actually what you *want*, Yukina?!"

I watched as her emotions slowly rose to the surface, and tears filled her eyes.

"...No, of course it isn't. But they're all gone now... They've forgotten me..."

"But *you* remember, don't you?!"

"...Huh?"

"As long as you remember, then that makes it real!"

It didn't matter if one half of a connection was erased as long as the other half was still around. Even if someone important to you lost their memories of you, you could still cherish that person anyway.

By this point, I was getting so emotional, I was on the verge of tears myself.

"I know how it feels, Yukina. I don't want you to forget me, either. And I don't want you to forget Misaki-chan, or anyone else on the track team — not when I know just how much they mean to you. But you? *You still remember*. You still have the precious memories that everyone else had to lose. So why would you throw that away? Please, don't give up."

Yukina hung her head. Her shoulders were trembling.

Would my feelings get through to her? I chose to believe that the answer was yes. I mean, think about it. If I didn't believe in my friendship with Yukina, then who the heck would?

As she sat there and shook, my chest ached at the thought that I was the one who made her feel this way.

But then...

"...Yeah... You're right... You're completely right," she choked in a watery voice punctuated with sobs. "I still remember... and that means... it's still real..."

Her voice was full of love and pain as she tried to reassure herself. I reached out and stroked her hair. Normally this was the kind of thing she would do for me, since she loved to act like my big sister, but this time the tables were turned. Maybe that was just how friendship worked.

As long as one single piece remained in existence, it wasn't truly gone. There was still a chance to get it back. Looking at it that way, it was kind of impossible for anything to get 100 percent erased. No matter what happened, it would always leave traces behind.

But then, there was a loudspeaker announcement, and President Katori summoned everyone to the gym. This time, the assembly was mandatory... and supposedly it was "the last one."

Once it was finished, Yukina murmured:

"Oh... Guess I gotta go."

Chapter 6: Showdown

Taichi had split away from the group, so when he heard Katori's announcement, he ran straight for the gym. But when he didn't see anyone else from the CRC there, he turned back and headed for the clubroom. There, he found three people: Inaba, Chihiro, and Enjouji.

"You're late! Didn't I tell everyone to meet up in front of the Rec Hall?!" Inaba raged.

"Well, Katori wants us in the gym, so I'd figured we'd all meet up there."

"No word from Iori, Yui, or Aoki... Tsk! Well, how'd it go? Any luck?"

"Well, their reaction was definitely different this time around, but as you might expect, no one was outright eager to join our side. As it stands, Watase and Ishikawa are the only people who've explicitly told me they'll trust us."

"Th-That's still an incredible accomplishment on its own!" Enjouji exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

"Then I tried to bribe Sone and Miyagami by saying I'd teach them how to get a girlfriend, but they both got so offended, they nearly punched my lights out."

"And you would have deserved it," Chihiro remarked, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

In the end, it took a fair few minutes to get the whole club together, so they were late to arrive at the gym. By then, almost everyone else was already there.

That said, the crowd looked a great deal smaller compared to the initial 100-plus headcount. Taichi estimated it was about the same size as the audience they'd spoken to on the one occasion they'd gone onstage — approximately 80 students, including the student council and the CRC

themselves.

As he looked around the room, he spotted students that had previously never bothered to show up. According to Katori, this was the last assembly he would need to call for... because they were going to escape. And since that was such an appealing prospect, chances were good that the entire population of the Isolation Zone was currently present.

Considering they'd started with 118, this would mean they'd lost... *more than 30 students?*

The students were gathered at the far end of the room. On the other side of the crowd was the student council and outreach committee... and yet Katori Jouji was nowhere to be seen. Where was he?

In just a few moments, though, Taichi felt a strange fervor spread through in the air. Everyone was looking up at the stage and *yearning* for something with all their hearts.

«The Third»'s group was conducting an experiment to observe changes in the human heart. Here in this petri dish, emotions of every stripe arose and vanished — emotions that would normally never occur back in the real world. Some of these feelings were positive, while others were negative. So how would one describe the feeling currently dominating the room?

It was so intense, Taichi could practically *see* the whirlpool of emotions threatening to consume everyone in the vicinity.

Then one person appeared, summoning the entire whirlpool to him. He had style, poise, and a handsome face... and when he stood above the rest, it gave him a natural sense of authority. It was the student council president, Katori Jouji. He positioned himself behind the mic.

"We need to end this. We need to go back to the real world," he stated calmly, and in a way, he seemed almost... above it all. "We've confirmed that the fistfight method does indeed work — we've tested it on a dozen different people. And new information has come to light."

“Get ready. We may have to stop them by force,” Inaba cautioned the others, tension audible in her voice.

“As it turns out, the fistfight can be with anyone, not just your group members.”

“For now, let’s get onstage and start a debate. We don’t need to win; we just need to buy some time. Katori’s dead serious about making this the last assembly, and the mood in the room—”

“Now then, let’s go out with a bang, shall we? All of you, start punching each other.”

It felt like the kind of suggestion only a monster would make. Surely no one would agree to it, right? Who would want to take part in a mass brawl with their friends? Especially since they knew the risks — that participants showed signs of memory loss right before disappearing. Surely this wasn’t what everyone wanted... and yet no one said a word.

Was their silence... tacit approval...?

“Go!” Inaba commanded.

But right as they took their first step, Katori stopped them.

“I’m not letting a single one of you set foot on this stage, CRC. Didn’t you people get the hint last time?”

Following Katori’s gaze, the entire crowd turned and looked at the CRC. The looks on their faces were far from encouraging. In fact, they were downright *hostile*.

Taichi could practically hear their silent demands: *Stop. We’re leaving. We’re ending this. We’re going home. We’re taking action. We’re getting out of here. We’re done. It’s over. We want to forget. You’re getting in the way.* The whirlpool of negative emotions threatened to engulf him.

But what of the scant few people they’d managed to convince?

Taichi made eye contact with Watase and Ishikawa. They stared down at the floor in silence. Granted, in a crowd like this one, anyone would be terrified to openly oppose the

majority opinion. Watase and Ishikawa had only said they would trust the CRC and nothing more.

Their gazes all bored into him. His knees were shaking. Nevertheless, he took a slow step forward on leaden legs. Likewise, the rest of the CRC followed suit.

But the crowd didn't stop them; they simply watched as the seven friends walked all the way to the set of stairs leading up onto the stage.

"Don't let them get up here. Surround them!" Katori commanded.

Instantly, the student council and outreach committee leapt into action. Seven bodies blocked their path. That number wasn't insurmountable — but it was increasing. Other students were starting to join in.

"The President's right!"

"Yeah!"

"Butt out already!"

Each of them voiced their support of Katori as well as their opposition to the CRC. Now there were ten students in the way.

Aoki, Taichi, and Chihiro stepped forward to protect the girls of the CRC.

"I wouldn't cause a scene if I were you. If a fight breaks out, why, someone might *disappear*," Katori sneered from onstage.

"Who says we need to fight with our fists?" Chihiro shot back. He started to move, but Inaba held up a hand to stop him.

"Don't. If we resort to force, we'll lose the high ground... Honestly, everyone should be able to hear us as long as we make sure to project our voices. Problem is, what do we tell them, and how?"

The CRC didn't have a request to make of *literally everyone*. So what was their next move? Taichi's mind raced as he tried to think of something. Then he struck upon an idea: to single out one specific person standing right in front

of them.

“What about you, Fujishima? You’re totally fine with this?”

But Fujishima didn’t even look at him. Almost like she hadn’t even noticed he was standing there.

Beside him, Inaba took a deep breath.

“Do you really think now is the time to force your way out of here by destroying your friendships and putting everyone at risk of losing their memories?! Banding together is the safer option *and* it’s more effective!”

“No, it’s time to quit. *Now*. These people can’t take it anymore — isn’t that right, folks?”

The students in the crowd were visibly nodding.

“You can’t just give up!” Kiriyaama shouted.

“If anyone’s ‘given up,’ it’s you people!” someone shouted back. And since it wasn’t clear where it came from, it felt like the *entire crowd* had said it... which made it even scarier.

The CRC wanted to help everyone have a change of heart, but there were just too many people. They couldn’t begin to connect with all of them on an individual level. And now that the people had lost faith in them, there was simply no way they could have a meaningful impact on the entire population.

A wall of people moved between the CRC and the stage. Consumed by the whirlpool of emotions, they almost looked like evil spirits. Could Katori really control these people without getting dragged beneath the surface?

What was *that boy* planning? What was *that girl* thinking? How was *that other boy* feeling? What about *that other girl* next to him?

No matter what the CRC said, it wouldn’t reach the entire crowd... but they didn’t have the time *or* the composure to address each person individually, either. They couldn’t turn the tables. They were... out of options...?

“So how about it, folks?” Katori called.

No one opposed him... but no one voiced their support,

either.

The students started to whisper amongst themselves.

“Right now?”

“What should we do?”

“What choice is there? We gotta do it.”

“You mean, *actually* do it?”

Very few people seemed to outright oppose Katori’s idea, but most of them weren’t eager to get started, either. Taichi got the sense that they were reluctant to do it on command. It didn’t help that no one seemed to know what would happen *after* they vanished, either.

“...Hey, Inaba? Guys? What if Nagase and I did a repeat performance of the stunt we pulled earlier?” Taichi whispered to the others. As far as he could tell, the students surrounding them were too busy talking amongst themselves to pay attention right now.

“You’re talking about the thing you did in front of Watase and Ishikawa, right? I suppose if we’re able to prove that it doesn’t work on us, it might render the whole thing pointless,” Inaba murmured, brow furrowed.

“If we make a big scene, I’m sure they’ll all see it,” Nagase added.

“Maybe it’ll break up this awkward tension they’ve got goin’ on,” Aoki commented.

“I’m not confident, but...” Kiriya shot a glance at Chihiro and Enjouji.

“I mean, if it’s our only option...” Chihiro trailed off.

“Th-Then we’ve gotta do it!” Enjouji exclaimed.

And with that, Taichi was committed. “Alright—”

Suddenly, vice president Sasaki grabbed his arm. It was so out of the blue, Taichi couldn’t help but stare in surprise.

“Everyone, restrain the CRC,” Sasaki commanded, and the rest of the student council took action immediately, seizing the other CRC members.

“Huh?”

“What the heck?!”

"Don't touch me!"

"Huhwha?!"

"...What the?"

The level of restraint varied widely; Taichi and Chihiro were only held by the arm, while Enjouji was put into a full nelson. As for Kiriya, she dodged her captor and jumped back a few steps.

"Care to explain this, Fujishima?" Inaba demanded, glaring at the girl in question as she held her by the arm.

"We know you people are... going to try something."

"We were just whispering. We weren't plotting anything."

Why had they chosen now, of all times, to interfere? Based on Fujishima's statement, it didn't seem as though they'd overheard anything.

"I saw you all engage in a fistfight... though we don't know what led up to it," Sasaki explained.

Inaba stared back, confused. "What? What's *that* supposed to — Oh." Suddenly, her expression shifted to horror. "Your phenomenon lets you see what your friends are about to experience, like, ten or however many seconds from now, right? So if you make use of it, you can see the future... Now I get it!"

"Wh-What is it?" Taichi asked, startled.

"Remember when we were tracking Katori to the dojo, and we kept encountering other student council members in the halls? They were positioned there on purpose to increase the likelihood that we'd run into them." Inaba glared around at the student council. "He's completely using you people. Is that what you want? To be his little pawns? I know you've all got jobs to do, but... outside of all that responsibility, isn't he your friend?"

Taichi felt Sasaki's hand tighten around his arm.

"I understand if you're nervous. I understand if you're feeling unsure," Katori continued without pause. "Which is why I've asked someone to speak to you today and help you make the right decision."

Who on earth was he going to bring out for this?

Then a student walked onstage. She was tall and slender, with stylish bleached hair. And if she wasn't quite so pallid and hunched over like a zombie, she'd probably look even more attractive.

It was Kiriya's best friend and Taichi's fellow classmate, Kurihara Yukina.

"What? Wh... Wh-What's happening? What is he making her do?" Kiriya whispered, glancing around nervously and hopping up and down to get a better view of the stage.

"Arguably, this student has suffered the most since we arrived here. And all of us have the potential to end up just like her. So while there's still time, I... Well, you can take it from here."

Katori stepped back and gestured for Yukina to stand at the podium; she stepped up without hesitation. Then she scanned the crowd — and when her eyes landed on the CRC and the student council, she seemed to pause there for a moment.

"I was a victim of the body-swap phenomenon with some other girls from the track team," she began, the microphone amplifying her weak, faint voice. "And I'm sure it's been hard for everyone here, but... it was really, really hard for us."

"...Wait, so... he's using Yukina as a *prop*?" Kiriya hissed, fuming quietly as she picked up on Katori's intentions.

"First, Misaki... She was my closest friend in the group. But then she lost her memories of us, and then she vanished from this world," Kurihara continued.

She explained how the sudden body-swaps meant none of the group members could have any privacy. How stressful it was. Then she talked about incidents in which other group members' secrets had come to light, permanently altering their friendships... and that their only option was to hole themselves up in a room together.

The emotion in her voice added a poignant layer on top of

everything else.

"I never realized how terrifying it would be to have a friend forget about you. And then, when I realized it was possibly my fault, it tore me apart inside. I was so full of regret... I kept wishing I'd done things differently."

Her voice grew even more emotional, and it tugged at Taichi's heartstrings.

"When Misaki disappeared, I was so confused at first. But now I know that it's real. I mean, I know we probably won't die, and we'll probably go back to normal, but still... Disappearing is scary stuff. Really scary stuff. It just doesn't feel right."

Any human being would be instinctively frightened of it.

"But then the President found us a way out of here."

Two of her friends vanished, then a third... leaving Kurihara all alone.

"I was afraid of disappearing. I didn't want to hit my friends. So I chose not to do it. But everyone else was willing to make that sacrifice in order to get out."

But she didn't sound as though she resented them for it. If anything, she seemed to have accepted it.

"And now that I'm all alone, I don't have to worry about the body-swap anymore."

The more she spoke, the stronger her voice grew.

"Now no one's left to encourage me to stick it out, so it's like... why am I even here? There's no point in putting myself through this. I've suffered enough."

It was then that Taichi realized: Katori's aim was to have Kurihara declare vocal support for the mass brawl.

"She's his secret weapon?! She comes across so down-to-earth... It lends credence to her argument in a way neither Katori nor we could ever achieve... This isn't looking good for us."

Evidently Inaba saw Kurihara as a serious threat.

"Should we interrupt her?" Taichi asked reflexively.

"No, you idiot. If we oppose her, the crowd will tear us

apart!”

It was obvious just how deeply the audience sympathized with Kurihara’s point of view.

“...Alright, I think we can let them go,” Sasaki told the rest of the student council. Evidently he’d decided the CRC didn’t need to be restrained any further. Instead, they continued to block the stairs leading onstage.

“M-Maybe Yui-senpai can stop her? They’re best friends, aren’t they?”

“...I can’t, Shino-chan. I don’t have the right to stop her.”

Kiriyama gazed up at the stage, her eyes full of tears, her hands clasped in front of her as if in prayer. She cared about her best friend far too much to stop her from pouring her heart out to the crowd.

“I thought to myself: If my friends are gone, then what’s the point of me keeping my memories of them? Who cares if the fistfights make you forget people? Not like any of *them* remember *me*. Those memories are worthless without someone else to share them with,” Kurihara declared, slamming her hands on the podium.

A real conversation required knowledge of the parties involved and the setting in which it took place. Otherwise, it was merely empty words... or worse, just noise. Only context could give it meaning.

And in the current context, Kurihara’s words carried an incredible amount of weight. Right now, she was quite possibly even more powerful than Katori or Inaba.

Once again, Taichi tried desperately to think of a plan. He looked at the crowd... then at Kurihara and Katori onstage... then at the student council right in front of them. He felt the presence of his friends standing beside him. And he thought of «Heartseed», possibly watching them in secret.

Please, let there be something... anything...

He searched and searched, but came up empty-handed.

“I don’t have any friendships left in this world. How can I, when all my friends are gone?”

The world was built on a foundation of inconsequential events, and those smaller pieces could be crushed under the weight of bigger ones. Take the CRC, for example: Despite all their best efforts, they had run out of cards to play. And as far as “bigger events” went, the phenomena were pretty damn big. These «Heartseeds» could destroy a lifetime of hard work in the blink of an eye. They could erase everything. Everything Taichi cared about. Everything *everyone* cared about.

Just then, Taichi felt Inaba’s hand touch his. At first he pulled back in surprise, but then he reached out again. Their fingers intertwined.

The worst-case scenario flashed through his mind, and he knew it was time to steel himself.

“But...”

But then—

“I still remember. I remember the friendships we shared.”

—a single ray of light—

“And as long as I still have the memories, those friendships are never truly gone.”

—cut through the darkness.

Kurihara’s words were not of despair and defeat, but of hope.

“Isn’t that right, Yui?”

Onstage, Kurihara’s expression was that of a loving older sister. Tears rolled down Kiriya’s cheeks as the two gazed at each other from a distance. One look at them and Taichi knew: Their hearts were connected.



"I know this isn't technically the real world, but I'm sure we'll have to go back eventually. The question is, how much of this stuff will carry over? I mean, these people were *emotionally devastated* when they disappeared. Their memories were all screwed up. Will we really just... *go back to normal* once we get back? I'm really not sure."

Her pace was gradually increasing.

"What if we're still all screwed up when we get back? Because I can't afford to lose the memories I have. I'm the only one who has them."

This was the real Kurihara. Once she got started, there was no stopping her.

"I've been friends with everyone on the track team since the spring of my first year. See, the track team holds this big marathon event for new recruits, and they tell the first-years they have to be fast or they can't join. So I ran like my life depended on it, and then I made it to the end, where there was this big barbecue, and the older students all congratulated me on my time... But now that I'm a second-year, I know better. It's not about how fast you run; we don't get a say in who joins the team. Honestly, I can't believe I actually complained that I was 'at a disadvantage' just because I'm a sprint runner."

Suddenly the topic had shifted to her memories of the track team.

"This one time, we went for a run outside... The weather was so bad that day, but we told ourselves we'd be fine and went for it anyway. Naturally, it started pouring down rain out of nowhere, and we all got soaked! And there was this other time... We were running down Main Street, and someone suggested we sneak away to the store and buy some ice cream. So we did, but then we got busted, and they got so mad at us! And two of the other girls got stomach aches! After that, we all started believing in karma."

These were all memories no one else had. No one except

the people who were present at the time. And if they all forgot, then those memories would be lost forever... but even then, it wouldn't change the fact that those things really happened.

"But just so we're clear, we're not complete slackers. We still put a lot of work in. Whenever we're at a track meet, we always clap each other on the back right before we go onto the field. It's, uh, for good luck or something. Oh, and we make paper cranes for anyone who gets injured, and we throw 'consolation parties' whenever someone loses a competition. Plus, there's even bigger parties for when someone wins! There's just... so many memories that I've made with the team..."

She balled her hands into fists.

"But these memories aren't special. In a way, they don't matter at all. But when I think about having to lose them... it *hurts*. I don't even want to imagine it. Without those first steps, you can't build something bigger. How could anyone be willing to sacrifice that?"

Life was full of tiny, inconsequential, yet irreplaceable moments.

"Earlier I said these memories are worthless without someone else to share them with. And yeah, they are. But all I have to do is make everyone remember them! And I can't do that unless / remember!"

The students in the crowd reacted with confusion at Kurihara's sudden ferocity. Even Katori looked perplexed. Like he hadn't seen this coming.

"If we can accept the risks involved, then we can follow Katori-kun's method to end this. But if I can avoid those risks by staying here and standing my ground, then that's what I'm going to do."

Her defiant voice spoke directly to their hearts.

"My phenomenon may be gone, but now I'm all alone. And yes, I want to get out of here ASAP. But I'm going to stick it out. Why? Because I'm the only one who can. So I'll

do it for my friends who couldn't do it themselves!"

Just then, she looked over in the direction of the CRC.

"As long as we can hold out, we'll make it out of here in one piece. Right, CRC?"

Taichi — and most likely everyone else, too — nodded firmly.

"Alright then. I'm choosing to believe in you guys."

"Hold it, Kurihara!" Katori hissed. He wasn't speaking into a mic, but since Taichi and the others were positioned near the stage stairs, they could hear him just fine. "This isn't what we discussed... but okay, fine." He switched on his cordless mic. "How can you trust them? For all we know, staying here might pose an even greater risk than leaving. They lied to us! And they have connections to some unknown entity! Are you really going to trust them over me?"

"I'm sorry, Katori-kun. It's not that I don't trust you; I just want to believe in them."

Reeling from her response, Katori lowered his mic.

"See, Kiriya Yui is kinda my best friend. And I'm pretty close with the rest of her club, too... At least, I'd like to think so." She shot a playful grin in the CRC's direction. "And if I can't even trust my friends right now, then who *can* I trust here, y'know?"

Her tone was so confident, it was almost provocative.

"If I have to endure a little suffering, then so be it! That's just how much I care about the track team!" she declared. Then, without making any demands of the audience, she gave a curt "thank you" and stepped away from the podium.

At this point, the actual purpose of her speech was a mystery. Did she just want to make a personal statement? Either way, it meant a great deal to the CRC. At last, someone understood them. At last, they had changed someone's mind.

Onstage, Kurihara pointed at the CRC and mouthed something: *Now it's your turn*. Then her flawless act fell

apart, and her expression crumpled. With one hand covering her face, she disappeared backstage.

"Yukina... She really went above and beyond for us. She pushed herself to the breaking point," Kiriya whispered, tears still streaming down her face.

Likewise, Taichi could feel a hot lump in his chest. It meant so much to him that there was even one person in this world who chose to believe in them.

"Well, uh... That... That was Kurihara's thoughts on the matter," Katori stammered.

Clearly Kurihara had completely derailed his plans. And now that she was gone, all that remained was mass confusion and hesitation. Even the student council looked panicky.

"I'm trying to gauge the situation... Is this our one chance to take action...?" Inaba murmured quietly.

"I don't know about that. I think maybe we could afford to take a gamble," Taichi found himself saying.

"Take a gamble? On what?"

"On *this*. What I'm saying is... we should try to have faith in everyone."

He couldn't see the future, but he was willing to believe in a happy ending.

Meanwhile, in the crowd, the negative spiral had come to a halt. Then one voice cut through the uncertainty:

"I don't have any kind of 'mission statement' like Kurihara, but..."

It was a voice Taichi recognized all too well.

"There's this good buddy of mine... His name's Yaegashi Taichi. And I want to believe in him."

It was Watase Shingo, Taichi's close friend since their first year. Watase was standing near the back of the crowd, and everyone else turned to look at him as he spoke.

He was standing with his hands in the pockets of his slacks, and Taichi had known the guy for long enough that he could tell he was nervous.

“When it comes down to it, this is just one of those things you gotta decide on your own. You can’t cave to peer pressure or let someone else decide for you. *You* have to make the call.”

His head was tilted slightly upwards, helping to project his voice all across the gym. Even without a mic, he seemed perfectly audible.

“But yeah, it seems there’s two different viewpoints: the President’s and the CRC’s. Honestly, I have no clue who’s right. I wouldn’t even know how to decide that!” he laughed, shrugging his shoulders. “But if I’m looking at 50-50 odds, then I’d rather stick with my best bud. We can regret everything together — the more the merrier!”

“Implying we’re the ‘wrong choice’?” Taichi retorted under his breath. Not that he expected Watase to hear him, of course.

And yet, Watase suddenly looked in his direction. Their eyes met. The connection was there — Taichi could feel it in his heart.

Watase had little reason to place his faith in Taichi, and yet he was choosing to do it anyway.

To think a single bond could make his heart feel so full... If he wasn’t careful, he might actually be moved to tears.

“You say you want to support your friend,” Katori replied from the podium, “but the majority of everyone here supports my position — including your other friends, I’m sure. Don’t you want to value their opinions, too?”

“Well, I mean, no one except the CRC is really trying to take a stance one way or the other. Everyone else is just sort of playing it by ear, y’know? Me included.”

“I would say I’m taking a stance myself. The optimal stance that takes everyone’s needs into consideration.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. You’re an incredible president, you know that? I’m amazed you’re able to lead people at a time like this. It’s just... Hmmm...” Watase paused to think for a moment, then continued, “It feels like you don’t have any...”

you know... underlying convictions.”

“Excuse me? How the hell would you know? You think you can do a better job than me?! No, you can’t! No one can! Which is why I have to do it!” Katori raged.

“Whoa, jeez! Sorry, I’m not trying to bust your balls here, man!” Watase replied hastily. “I just... wanna believe in the CRC, that’s all. Oh, and I *really* don’t wanna have to punch my friends. That’s a big part of it, I’d say.”

An awkward tension hung in the air as the conversation between Watase and Katori came to an end. Everyone was on edge, waiting to see what would happen next.

Had the masses switched from Katori’s proposal to the CRC’s? No. The CRC hadn’t gained the confidence of the crowd. They were simply hoping for something, *anything*, to break them free of their prison.

Was it time for the CRC to take a stand? Would the President change up his tactics? Or—

“Me too!”

“Me too!”

Two girls called out at nearly the exact same time. They were standing somewhere within Watase’s vicinity, and if Taichi wasn’t mistaken, it had sounded an awful lot like...

Nakayama Mariko and Setouchi Kaoru exchanged a look.

“I’m pretty sure I beat you there, Kaoru-chan!”

“It’s not about speed, genius!”

They were bickering, but in a playful way, like they used to do back in Classroom 2-B.

“Iori! I’m gonna show you what love looks like!”

“Oh yeah? Well, *I’ll* show you what *true* love looks like!”

Both of them pointed directly at Nagase.

“...The hell are they talking about?” Inaba asked dubiously. This was a question Taichi had been wondering himself.

“Go for it, you two! I mean, uh... assuming your boyfriends are okay with it?!”

From the way Nagase spoke, apparently it was some kind

of in-joke between them.

"Oops... I kinda maybe forgot to ask first... Uhh, Ishikawa-kun?"

"As my good friend once said, we should all believe in our friends. I see no reason to hesitate. Besides, I owe a debt to Yaegashi," Ishikawa replied in his calm, deep voice. The last part was actually meant to be a joke, but the average person wouldn't know this unless they'd known Ishikawa for a while.

"Same here! I want to be with Setouchi-san... not just for her sake, but for my own. So if she wants to stay here, then I do, too!" Shiroyama Shouto declared as he raced over to her. Then he turned back to look at his groupmates and pressed his hands together in apology. "Sorry, guys! Don't take it personally!"

...Was it safe to get their hopes up?

"I choose the Cultural Research Club!"

"I'm going to stay behind and stand my ground!"

"Me too!"

"Me too!"

One by one, more voices joined the chorus.

"Basically, it's like... I want to *keep trying*. I want to believe in myself, and my friends, and the person I love. Y'know?"

Nakayama's sincerity penetrated Taichi's heart. It served both as encouragement to keep fighting *and* as a warning not to let everyone down. The connections were chains, and the chains were connections.

Meanwhile, some other students had a very different take on the situation.

"Why are they all talking about love?"

"Because they're dating each other."

"Wait, what?! I had no idea!"

"Ugh, why are they shouting about it?"

"Are they trying to show off?"

Including Watase, there were now five people siding with Kurihara in support of the CRC. It wasn't much, but still, it

was five more than they had a minute ago. Together, they had changed five minds.

“...Alright then, we’ve heard some more opinions from the peanut gallery,” Katori announced. His voice was shaking, but he held himself together. “If you’ve made up your minds, then I won’t try to argue with you. However... you know you only get to decide for yourselves, right? You don’t get to dictate what other people do.”

His voice was lower than it had been initially, but it showed no signs of breaking.

“Now let me ask: Does anyone else agree with these people? Is there anyone else who wants to stay behind in this frightening world where anything could happen?”

His phrasing struck Taichi as unfair.

“Yeah, well, I can’t imagine a *mass brawl* is any safer!” Inaba shot back.

Katori didn’t respond; she didn’t continue. No one else said a word. Even Taichi could sense that it wasn’t the right time to do so; after all, they were currently in no position to influence anyone.

No, what they needed right now was a third party. Someone who wasn’t Katori or the CRC. *Surely someone will make a stand*, Taichi prayed silently. First Kurihara, then Watase, then Nakayama and the others, and then...

But no one rose to the task.

The whole room went silent, making it even harder for anyone new to speak out. Seconds ticked by. Watase and the others were frozen awkwardly in place. Now it was starting to feel as though the next person to speak would decide the outcome of the entire assembly. Was there *anyone* who could cut through the oppressive feeling in the air?

“...Right. Clearly you’re all tired of being here. I can tell you’ve chosen to go with my proposal.”

Katori was so panicked, he was rushing to conclusions.

“I don’t think that’s true at all. No one’s said a word in favor of your plan,” Inaba shouted up at the podium.

“They don’t need to. But if you insist, we can all make the decision right here and now. How’s this? All those in favor of my idea, stay here in the gym; all those who side with the CRC, leave. Now take some time to talk amongst yourselves before you decide.”

All at once, everyone turned to their groupmates and started discussing their thoughts. Even the student council.

“What should we do?” said one.

“I mean, we can’t *not* choose the President, now can we?” said another.

“Maybe this would be a good time to make our final stand,” Nagase suggested to the rest of the club.

“Yeah! Yukina vouched for us, and then Watase-kun and everyone else vouched for us. It’s time we vouched for ourselves!” Kiriya declared.

But Inaba didn’t look convinced. “We could certainly *try* to convince everyone right here and now. I’m sure we could convert a handful of people. But no matter what we say, Katori will try to argue with us. Then the crowd will split into two factions — Team Katori versus Team CRC — and the former will start a mass brawl without us. Damn it... Do we really have to leave it up to chance? Is there anyone... *anyone* with the charisma to lead us all into salvation? Or are we completely fucked?”

“You wouldn’t happen to be referring to me, would you, Inaba-san?” said Fujishima Maiko, breaking her silence.

“Because I can feel you looking at me.”

“Huh? Oh, *no*, of course not,” Inaba replied in a tone of feigned innocence.

“And I suppose you and Yaegashi-kun are holding hands just to show off, then?”

“Wha?!”

“Huh?!”

Instantly, Taichi and Inaba pulled their entwined hands apart.

“F-Force of habit,” Inaba stammered awkwardly.

"I know, I know. You're the damsel in distress, and Yaegashi-kun is your knight in shining armor... You know, I bet if I pointed it out, the crowd would turn against you out of spite."

"Don't you dare," Taichi shot back.

At the surface level, this was a pointless exchange, and yet it felt like Fujishima was finally back to her normal self. Anything could happen.

"Inaba-san, I think you were right about me," Fujishima continued calmly.

All around her, the other student council associates were shocked to see her acting so casual at a time like this.

"I always hide behind my responsibilities. I thought I'd grown out of it, but I haven't." She let out a self-deprecating laugh. "Whenever something appears to be beyond my control, I tell myself to stay in my own lane. And until now, I was fine with that. Tell me, Yaegashi-kun, do you remember the conversation we had on the pier, on the last day of the school trip?"

"...Suddenly I'm *really* interested to hear where this is going," Inaba commented, her tone barbed.

"Did... did I forget to tell you about it, Inaba? W-Well, to be clear, I wasn't trying to hide it! Nothing inappropriate happened!"

"I seem to remember we talked about *stripping down*..."

"Fujishima?! Could you please stop trying to give her the wrong idea?!"

She acted like she was dead serious, but he knew she was totally screwing with him on purpose.

"Long story short, Yaegashi-kun showed me that he was willing to set his ego aside. And likewise, it inspired me to stop clinging to my title and just be myself."

Technically Taichi had barely contributed to that emotional process at all, but still.

"Ever since then, I've been trying to be my honest, unguarded self, but here, it's simply impossible. I need some

kind of armor or I'll break. Contrary to how I may appear, I'm quite the fragile flower, you know."

Honestly, she didn't seem the least bit "fragile" in his eyes, but he knew she knew herself better than he did.

"I wanted to be superhuman. I wanted to be *perfect*. But whenever I fell short of the absurdly high standards I set for myself, I simply put my head in the sand and refused to acknowledge it. Instead, I found a role to fill and filled it. And like a coward, I told myself that that was enough."

Taichi could relate to her feelings of inadequacy.

"But life's not that easy. I'm ready to admit it: I can't be Superman."

Growing up, just about everyone aspired to be a superhero(ine) at some point. But Taichi didn't want her to lose hope altogether. "Come on, don't sell yourself short, Fujishima."

"I'm not being pessimistic, honestly; I do have a new plan in mind. You know, Inaba-san, I consider you to be my most formidable rival... Oh, and Nagase-san?"

Nagase turned to look at her.

"Just so we're clear, Nagase-san, I'm doing this for you," Fujishima told her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm honored...?"

"And Kiriya-san, when we get back to the real world, I hope you'll let me feed you."

"Feed me *what?!?*"

"Sorry, lady, but that's my girlfriend, and—"

"I have no interest in you, Aoki-kun."

"Ouch! Rude! How have you already mastered the art of dunking on me?!?"

"Moving on. Enjouji-san, Uwa-kun, I'm amazed you're able to tolerate these people."

"Th-They're all so cool, it drains my MP constantly!"

"Meh, I've kinda gotten used to it."

"Now then, it's time for... Oh, I forgot about Yaegashi-kun."

“Th-That’s a joke, right? You didn’t actually forget me, right?!” *I thought we were friends, Fujishima!*

“You know, friendship truly is magical, isn’t it?” She let out a deep sigh. “Yaegashi-kun, would you consider me a friend?”

Thus far, the two of them had built an odd relationship. And if the CRC lost this fight, and the Record Wipe erased all their memories pertaining to the phenomena, that relationship would surely be altered. Conversations like these would never happen between them again.

“I’d say you and I are fri— I mean, riv— I mean... It’s complicated.”

Fujishima stared back in surprise for a moment, then let out a giggle. “Complicated, indeed.”

She spun on her heel, turning her back to them — something she would surely never do if she saw them as enemies.

“Life doesn’t always work out the way I hope it will, but... it’s people like you that make all the ups and downs worthwhile. That goes for the student council and outreach committee, too, of course.”

“F-Fujishima-san...”

“Fujishima...”

The student council associates looked perplexed, but didn’t seem inclined to stop her.

“I snapped back to reality once I realized I couldn’t be Superman. But...” She donned her most charming smile. “That doesn’t mean I can’t be Batman.”

“...I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Taichi blinked in confusion. Somehow she always managed to defy his every expectation.

“I’m only human. I’ll never actually have superpowers. But with the right tools and a little elbow grease, I can get pretty damn close.” She raised a hand in farewell, then turned and headed for the stage. “Give me three minutes and I’ll change the world.”

As far as one-liners went, it was pretty badass.

"...What is it, Fujishima? Why are you coming onstage?"

Katori asked from the podium.

They could only make out bits and pieces of her response:

"...me take the mic... don't really *need* it, but... for the aesthetic..."

Apparently she was trying to steal the podium mic.

"What are you going to say?"

"Whatever I want. Is there a problem?"

The whole crowd fell silent, transfixed on the stage. This made it easier to hear their exchange.

"I'll handle this, and you focus on the outreach committee. Is that not what we agreed on?"

"In that case, I won't be needing *this* anymore." Fujishima grabbed her student council armband and pulled it off. Now her biggest source of emotional support was gone.

"You're abdicating your duties? Now, of all times?!"

"I don't care about my duties. Right now, I want to speak from a personal perspective. Now get out of my way. Any student has the right to speak their mind, do they not?"

"Damn it..."

Her demands were unwavering, forcing Katori to relinquish the floor to her. As he stepped aside, she positioned herself behind the podium.

"Hello there, everyone. My name is Fujishima Maiko, and I represent... er, well... not much at the moment. But I'd like to give my own thoughts on the matter as a fellow second-year student at Yamaboshi High School."

Her well-modulated voice carried easily across the gym, almost like she was born to make speeches.

"Regarding the President's escape plan..."

Fujishima looked out across the crowd, calmly taking in the faces of those looking up at her. But Taichi knew she was probably terrified inside. No matter how invincible she looked, she had her own flaws... because Fujishima Maiko was far from perfect.

“...It just doesn’t feel right to me.”

Taichi had expected her to immediately go on the offensive with facts and logic, so this opener came across as surprisingly vague.

“Should we really be knocking each other around in order to force our way out of here?”

Even the students protecting the stage were completely focused on her.

“Now I’d like to ask you all a question: What is our purpose as students?”

This caught everyone by surprise, Taichi included.

“Put more simply, I believe we need to consider what it is that we truly value. What do you think, Mr. President?”

She pulled the mic off of its stand and held it up to Katori’s face, like a reporter.

“What do you mean?” he asked. Evidently her performance had put him completely at a loss.

“Tell me, what is our purpose as students?”

“Well... to get an education while learning how to be a functional member of society, I’d say.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“To study a handful of different subjects, make friends, and live your best life at school to ensure your future will be bright.”

“Hmm. Not bad, not bad. Now, what is the purpose of the student council? Fundamentally, I mean.”

“To support the students and... keep that system running smoothly.”

“Well then, that’s what we ought to be doing,” she replied with a smile, then turned back to the crowd. “Now, let’s start at bullet point one: believing in our friends. The CRC wants all of us to make it out of here safely. Is that not one of our goals as well?”

“I won’t deny—” Katori began, and Fujishima pointed the mic at him so he could be heard. “I won’t deny that. I just don’t trust them, that’s all. There’s no way staying here is

the safe option when we're trapped here with these phenomena. And I'd wager everyone here agrees."

"Yes, I imagine staying here will be incredibly stressful. You, and everyone else, probably feel that it would be impossible to overcome your phenomena at this stage. Is that not what it comes down to, moreso than a lack of trust in the CRC?"

"Well, it's... it's both."

"Then you should try to trust them."

It was so simple, and yet it cut right to the heart of the matter.

"Let's all try to have faith. Let's have confidence in ourselves. It's all going to end eventually, isn't it? Then let's endure it with a smile, right to the bitter end. That's how a good student completes their extracurricular activities."

That was certainly one way to put it, even if it was a bit of a stretch. But at the same time, it felt like a weight had been lifted. Thinking about the Isolation Zone as one big extracurricular activity made it seem a *lot* less scary.

"Let's all make it to the end with a smile. Why wouldn't we want to strive for that?" Fujishima asked the crowd. Then she glanced over her shoulder at Katori. "A true leader always strives to pursue their ideals, and that's exactly what I want to do. So my plan is to stick it out."

She was by no means condescending to them. She was simply speaking from her own independent point of view.

"How many of you have witnessed your fellow students punching each other in order to escape? I certainly have — I stood on the sidelines and let it happen. As such, I'm in no position to judge. But I will say that it was a terrifying experience. Friends, hurting each other as hard as they can? In a sane world, that would never happen, which leads me to believe that all those who resorted to this method were truly broken inside. Some even expressed joy at the thought of being freed... but in their hearts, all of them were crying. I don't want anyone else here to have to experience that."

She named all of the things everyone else tried not to see.

"I want us all to leave here hand in hand. No more fighting, no more tragedy, and *definitely* no more fistfights. I want everyone to keep their heads held high."

It was an honest plea; one that everyone would make, deep in their hearts.

"...That being said, I understand that from your perspective, what I wish for is essentially a pipe dream. But to be clear, you're free to abandon your dreams and give up any time you like. So tell me: Are you *sure* you've hit your limits? Before you go running away with your tail between your legs, don't you think you ought to put up a real fight?"

There were no brakes on the Fujishima train.

"Did you truly give it everything you had? Did you try every last option? Or did you use your phenomenon as an excuse to sit on your hands and do nothing?"

The crowd was dead silent. How was this speech impacting them?

"These stressful circumstances have no impact on your ability to put up a fight. Just because something is difficult, it doesn't mean you've earned the right to just shrug and give up."

Out of context, her words were harsh and critical, but her tone was perfectly calm.

"This is a lesson I had to learn for myself today. Now then, I'm done lecturing. Next, I'd like to ask you all a question."

She scanned each of their faces as she asked:

"What do you believe is the right thing to do at this very moment? What do you want to see happen, and how? Forget about other people's opinions and just ask yourself. The little voice that answers? That's the answer you want."

Ultimately, she chose to let the people make the final call.

Her speech came to an end, and no one spoke out. Not the CRC, not even Katori. To do so would be disrespectful.

Their only option now was to wait. If the CRC wanted the

masses to believe in them, then they'd have to start by believing in the masses. But what would they believe in? The strength of their character? Their hearts? These things were invisible to the naked eye. Intangible. So how, then, could they attempt to evaluate it?

Most likely, the answer was—

“Hey, um... I, uh...!”

A boy called out from the crowd. It was Kimura, a first-year who had presumed heavily on Taichi's kindness during the Dream Vision phenomenon. He was bold to the point of recklessness, and frankly, it was almost admirable. Who'd have thought *Kimura* would be their secret weapon? Right now, he was the only one with the guts to speak out.

And all it took was one person to set the whole world in motion.

“You there! Go ahead,” Fujishima called, gesturing to him.

“I'm in the same class as Uwa and Enjouji-san, so...!” He glanced around at the people standing nearby and realized everyone was staring at him. For a moment he hesitated, but then he kept going. “I wanna believe in my classmates! They're good people!”

“K-Kimura-kun...” Enjouji stared at him, eyes wide, with a hand clapped over her mouth like she was touched. It must've had an impact on Chihiro, too, because he stared at the floor like he didn't want anyone to see his face.

“But most of all, I believe in the legend of Lord Yaegashi! Remember what they say? Trust in Yaegashi-san, and everything will be okay!”

“Yeahhhh, I don't know about that one,” Taichi retorted under his breath. What on Earth was Kimura telling these people?

Just then, someone else spoke up.

“Y-Yeah, I... Ack!”

It was Taichi's classmate Miyagami. During the school trip, the two of them had been assigned to the same group.

Taichi could scarcely believe it. Miyagami hated speaking

in front of a large audience; even now, his voice had audibly cracked under the pressure. And if he was willing to endure it in order to get his message across, then Taichi wanted to give him his full attention.

Miyagami cleared his throat. “Basically, uh... I’ve been kinda overwhelmed. I mean, anyone would be! First we’re trapped here! Then these nobodies try to act like leaders! And then they tell us to take the option that sucks the most!”

By “nobodies,” he must have meant the CRC.

“And everyone else seemed against it, too!”

His voice wavered uncontrollably as he explained his perspective, piece by piece.

“See, I’ve always been the kind of guy who follows the trends. I tell myself, if everyone else is doing it, then it must be the right thing to do... Wait a minute! That has nothing to do with anything!”

If the circumstances were different, the crowd might have laughed. But here, no one did. His courage wasn’t a joke.

“So anyway, uh... Oh, right. I just want to say I’m sorry... mostly to Yaegashi, but to the whole CRC crew. I suspected the hell out of you guys. But now...”

His next words were what Taichi had been waiting for.

“I wanna believe in my friends! I’m done whining and complaining — I wanna actually try my best to survive here! And if it turns out my best doesn’t cut it, then I guess I can always throw in the towel. So yeah, I’m bucking the trend to do my own thing!”

“M-Me too!” Sone shouted, raising his hand in the air as he stood beside Miyagami. “Now, I know it looks like I’m just copying him, but I’m not! At least, I’m not trying to... Well, okay, maybe I am.”

He was so nervous, he broke down in a coughing fit.

“Anyway, I’m good friends with Yaegashi... right? We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Taichi started to reply *of course*, but Sone continued

regardless.

“And I’m good friends with Miyagami, too, so yeah... that’s the kind of friendship I want to believe in.”

Sure, Sone must have been influenced by comments from the CRC, Kurihara, and Fujishima. But the opinion that affected him most of all was probably Miyagami’s. It was like a domino effect; each piece reached out and touched a different piece in turn.

One by one, their hearts connected.

“Besides... y’know, for an ‘extracurricular activity,’ this is pretty wild! It’s like something out of a manga! So if I just tell myself I’m the protagonist of some crazy manga, I feel like I can tough it out!”

The next people to speak were first-years who shared a class with Chihiro and Enjouji. The four of them were standing a short distance away.

“Us, too!” they all shouted in unison. “We choose the CRC!”

“Shimono... Tada...” Chihiro whispered.

“Tomomi-chan... Higashino-san...!” Enjouji exclaimed.

“I just... I really can’t imagine that Uwa and Enjouji-san are capable of plotting some evil scheme behind our backs.”

“Besides, it’s thanks to them that we all opened up to each other.”

“But they didn’t do it to get popular or anything. They went right back to sitting on the sidelines.”

“They only took action because they had to.”

Chihiro and Enjouji had left an impression on their classmates — and everything they’d built since then had paid off.

“As for the rest of the CRC... No offense, senpai, but we don’t really know you. And frankly, you’re kind of terrifying.”

“But if those two trust you, then we trust you, too.”

Their hearts had connected not just to Chihiro and Enjouji, but Taichi and the others, too.

From there, more and more voices spoke up. Had they

come around on the CRC's proposal? Had they sympathized with Kurihara? Had Fujishima convinced them? Or Kimura, or Miyagami, or Sone?

Technically, no. There was no singular reason. In actuality, all of it came together to contribute to this one singular moment.

All of it had significance. *All of it* had value. *All of it* had purpose.

"This is so dramatic... Screw it, I'm in!"

"Are you just saying that, or do you actually mean it?"

"I admit, it *does* feel like I'm just doing it for the attention. But does that really matter right now?!"

"You heard 'em! Let's give it all we've got!"

"*Yeah!*"

"I'm scared, but... they're right. Maybe it's still too early to give up."

"Yeah. I can keep going."

"I'm not going to let you people show me up!"

"Let's do this!"

"You know, once you start thinking of it as an extracurricular activity, it doesn't seem that bad anymore..."

"Right? I *really* don't want to hit my friends and lose my memories."

"Yeah! I'm not giving up hope yet!"

"Let's give it our best shot!"

A wave was spreading throughout the gym. They'd all met up for assemblies several times since they arrived in the Isolation Zone, but this was the first time everyone's voices were clearly audible. They were all talking at once, and yet each of them stood out distinctly without blending into an unintelligible buzz. Was it because Taichi had changed his perspective? Or because they changed theirs?

The world had visibly changed. And to the CRC's delight, a large majority of the crowd had chosen them.

"We're counting on you, CRC!"

"Don't let us down!"

“The CRC always finds a way to liven things up, don’t they? Like the Culture Festival.”

“Oh man, last year’s Culture Festival was legendary! They used a paparazzi photo to get two teachers to confess their love to each other!”

“And their first-year club presentation was a masterpiece! Remember? Nagase Iori’s High-Speed Cosplay Show!”

“I can’t wait to see what they do this year!”

...The conversation was rapidly getting off-topic.

Nearly two years had passed since the CRC was first formed, and a lot had happened since then.

The Isolation Zone was once dominated by anger and pain and powerlessness and despair, but now it was shifting. Humans were capable of finding hope in the most bleak of circumstances. They could take a monochrome world and dye it in their own colors.

Curiously, Taichi stole a glance at the rest of the CRC.

Eyes full of tears, Nagase was trembling like she was threatening to jump for joy any moment now; Inaba was periodically wiping her cheeks as she beamed from ear to ear; Kiriya was sobbing openly; Aoki was cheering with both fists in the air; Enjouji was flailing around like she just couldn’t take it anymore; Chihiro was smiling sheepishly and scratching his head.

And as for Taichi himself...

“Huh?”

Something trickled down his cheek. Laughing, he hastily wiped it away. Where did that come from?

He was overjoyed, and relieved, and delighted, and touched, and validated — all sorts of emotions blended together. There were no words to describe it... but then again, he didn’t really *want* to describe it. All he wanted was to hold onto this feeling for the rest of his life.

Now, with his own two eyes, he had witnessed proof that all those tiny, insignificant moments truly did matter. And he wanted to live each moment to the fullest. Just like anyone

else, probably. No matter what happened, he couldn't let them wipe away everything he'd built.

"We don't have to keep holding ourselves back! Let's go!" one of the outreach committee members shouted. And just like that, the students who were blocking the stage stairs ran off to reunite with their friends.

"We're going to meet up with Fujishima-san, right?"

"I'm coming, too!"

The three members of the outreach committee ran up the stairs, leaving a gaping hole in the wall that separated the CRC from the stage. Only the student council remained committed to their task.

"Does it really matter anymore? Go be with Katori," Inaba told them.

After a moment of hesitation, they, too, turned and filed onstage. The CRC followed after them. Meanwhile, the outreach committee all flocked around Fujishima.

"Fujishima-san! We're going to stay with you and fight till the bitter end!"

"All of you? Are you sure? I've cast away the outreach committee, so you have no obligation to side with me."

"That doesn't matter. You'll always be the outreach committee leader! ...Actually, no, it's not about that at all. We want to follow you, no matter where you go."

"We've been by your side every step of the way, and we know just how incredible you are!"

How would Fujishima respond to this outpouring of support? Would she shrug it off? Respond with a joke? Or would she defy all expectations?

Biting her lip, she stared at the floor for a long moment, her brow furrowed. And when she finally looked up again, her eyes were red... but no tears had been spilled. Only Fujishima could reach her breaking point and somehow still hold herself together.

"I'm so glad I joined the committee and met all of you... Thank you..."

Sniffing, she gazed at them with affection in her eyes. Then she lifted her glasses, wiped her eyes dry, and turned to face Katori, who had dropped to the floor on the spot.

"Say, Mr. President? ...Katori-kun?"

He didn't respond. All of a sudden, he looked so very haggard.

"Why...? It was what they wanted... They wanted a way out... so I did whatever it took to make that happen... and now they don't need me anymore?!"

"Now, now, don't get the wrong idea. Your ability to lead during this crisis is truly something to be commended, and the students *do* need you," Fujishima reassured him.

"Without you, I'm sure this would've turned out a whole lot worse," Inaba chimed in. "You did a great job bringing everyone together."

Unfortunately, their praise seemed to have the opposite effect. Glaring sharply, he jumped to his feet.

"I'm in the right! I have the answer! But they still won't listen to me! ...Forget it. If you don't want to get out of here, then I'll go by myself if I have to. You're welcome."

"Oh, don't be stupid. As I recall, you're not so irresponsible as to shirk your duties the second you slip up. Who would you start a fight with, anyway?"

"Sasaki! Miura! Hara! We're all getting out of here!"

He pointed to the vice president and two secretaries currently watching the scene unfold from behind the CRC.

"Get over here! You know I'm right about this, right? Right?"

At this, the bespectacled vice president, Sasaki, took a step forward.

"Don't do it!" Inaba called out hastily. "You gotta stop being his little sheep and—!"

"I've got this," Sasaki interrupted, his voice uncharacteristically firm.

"Oh, Sasaki! That's my VP. I knew you'd understand."

"Let's stop this, Katori. The students rejected our idea

because it was wrong.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Actually, it wasn’t ‘our’ idea, was it? It was *your* idea. The rest of us *weren’t allowed* to voice our opinions on the subject.”

His voice carried a quiet, yet palpable heat.

“Katori, you’re an incredible guy. You sensed how we were feeling and did your best to fight for us... all while we sat back and let you do all the heavy lifting.”

Meanwhile, Katori was no longer fuming. Instead, he stared directly at Sasaki.

“What I *should’ve* done was lend a hand and give input when you needed it. But instead, I told myself I was ‘just a subordinate’ and dumped everything on your shoulders.”

Sasaki’s voice was full of bitter regret, but he pressed on regardless.

“From now on, I’m going to make my opinions known. I don’t know what’s ahead of us, but... for right now, I think we should stay and fight it out. Not because we’re the student council, but because you’re my friend, and I care about you.”

“...Why the hell would you want to stay?”

“Do you really think the correct choice is to punch people and lose our memories, all so we can take a shortcut out of here? Or do you think perhaps we should listen to the people who seem to have prior experience with this stuff?”

“I...”

“I know you must’ve realized it at some point. But you went out of your way to make things completely cut and dried in order to give the people hope, right? You wanted to seem like you had it all under control so chaos wouldn’t break out. That’s the kind of thing you like to worry about.”

Katori nodded weakly. “You might be right... You know, I think that’s the first time since we got here that I actually agreed with someone else.” At last, he finally seemed to relax for a change. “I was constantly on guard 24/7...

Otherwise I probably would've passed out, you know?
Seeing as we're trapped here with all these phenomena..."

For the first time, this competent, capable guy actually seemed like a teenager. This was probably the "real" him, whereas the constant demands of his environment and title had forced him to pretend to be someone else.

"...I agree with Sasaki's opinion. Miura? Hara? What about you?"

"I'd like to stay here with you, President Katori!"

"Let's make the student council a united front against the crisis!"

"Alright then, it's settled. I need to reorganize my thoughts a bit... Is everyone cool with that?"

"Of course," said Fujishima.

"Why would anyone say no?" said Inaba.

At last, the backbone of the student body had come together as one.

"...But then again, if I change my tune this late in the game, you'll all laugh at me..."

"Eh, I don't know about that. Right, Fujishima?" Inaba asked, shooting her a meaningful look.

"Right," Fujishima nodded.

"If anything, just wait until they remember that the CRC's supposedly 'in cahoots with the mastermind' or whatever. Then all hell will break loose," Inaba continued wryly.

"I'll go talk to them." And with that, Fujishima spun on her heel and grabbed the podium mic. Not a single second wasted.

"Alright, everyone. Is it safe to say that you're all willing to keep fighting?"

"YEAH!" the crowd shouted back in chorus.

"Thank you, everyone. Whether you're fully committed or you're honestly just going along with the rest of your group, I appreciate you. So, is everyone in agreement here? From now on, we'll all work together to get each other through this."

Like a true commander of the people, Fujishima gesticulated emphatically with her hands as she spoke.

"That said, I'm sure there will be times when things get hard, or you feel you disagree with the way things are. I won't tell you not to feel that way. But if possible, I hope you'll reach out to the people around you and fight alongside them. I promise, I'll be right there with you. And I'd like to work hand in hand with our President, too."

She gestured to Katori, and all eyes turned to him.

"While we may have butted heads in the past... Well, perhaps the CRC should speak for themselves. Anyone?"

"Iori, you're the club president — you go. You know what to say, right?"

"What? I'm not you, Inaban! If I go up there, they'll just be confused! Ugh, being president always comes back to bite me at the worst possible times... I'm so nervous!" Nagase complained playfully.

Then she walked up to the podium and accepted the mic from Fujishima.

"Hi, uh, I'm Nagase, president of the CRC. For a while now we've been at odds with President Katori-kun, but deep down, I think we both wanted the same thing: to keep everyone safe."

She glanced at Katori as she spoke.

"As long as we have each other, we can get through this. We're all on the same team, so let's put our heads together and make it happen!"

Then she walked over to Katori and held out her hand. For a moment, he stared down at it in silence.

"Yeah... We're not enemies. We're friends," he muttered.

The words struck a chord deep within Taichi's heart. All this time, they'd struggled to see eye to eye and sometimes even got hostile with each other, but they weren't really enemies. They were only human.

Katori let out a long breath. Judging from the relief on his face, a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. At

last, he was no longer haunted by the demonic swirl of emotions generated by the crowd.

In large groups, human emotions could be unspeakably powerful... and sometimes they could be frighteningly dark. But when united in a single direction, those feelings had the power to change the world.

"I'd be happy to fight by your side," Katori continued as he grasped Nagase's hand. Cheers rose from the crowd. "Now it's time for me to take care of business."

He strode past her to the podium.

"Look, uh... I said some stuff about the CRC being shady, and that it was their fault we got trapped here, and that they were pulling the strings from behind the scenes."

Wow, he's really going there? Taichi thought. How's he planning to handle it?

"But I was wrong," Katori continued casually. "The members of the CRC are Yamaboshi students, just like you and I. Why should we believe the word of some unknown entity over our own fellow students? It's absurd. I mean, yes, whoever it was did say that the reason we're here 'lies with them,' but that doesn't mean they put us here on purpose, does it?"

He paused to contemplate his own question for a moment, then turned to the CRC and bowed deeply in apology.

"I leapt to the most dickish conclusion, and for that, I'm sorry!"

Nagase shook her head. "You don't have to—"

"Don't feel bad."

"Uh, Fujishima? He wasn't talking to you!" Taichi retorted reflexively.

But Fujishima ignored him and walked up to the podium. Then she leaned into the mic and declared:

"Now then, no more infighting! There are no enemies among us! From now on, we work together as one group! I'm going to fight this thing, and I want all of you to fight with

me!”

The crowd went wild with applause. Their hearts were as one... and Fujishima Maiko had returned to her former glory.



The mood in the gym was completely unlike that of assemblies past. The eighty-odd remaining students in the Isolation Zone had unified themselves behind a single goal. And once that goal was established, all the minor stuff started to fall by the wayside.

The audience had split off into several large groups — not just their phenomenon buddies, but their other friends, too.

“Maybe we should have regular patrols.”

“But some people wouldn’t be able to patrol due to their phenomena.”

“Okay, well, excluding them...”

“I wish we knew the exact trigger for the disappearances...”

“Yeah, but we can’t risk testing it.”

“Well, from what I saw...”

Meanwhile, Inaba and Fujishima marched around, shouting words of encouragement:

“Your phenomenon only has as much power as you give it! Make it your bitch!”

“Remember, this is just an extracurricular activity! Think of it as a fun little experiment!”

Evidently their objective was to teach these people how to combat the phenomena.

“I think you’re asking a little too much,” Katori shot back at them. Then he called to the crowd, “If anyone needs to talk, you know where to find me!”

Apparently he was attempting to balance out their hardline approach by adopting a more moderate stance. Thinking about it, he was perhaps better suited to this sort of position.

“Wow... This sure is incredible... Right, Taichi-senpai?” Enjouji gushed. She appeared to be incredibly moved by this turn of events.

“I’ll say. When I look at them, it really fills me with hope.”

Rrrrrrip.

“Right?! It feels like we can do anything we... Wh-What’s the matter, Taichi-senpai?” she asked dubiously after she noticed him looking around in confusion.

“Did you hear that weird sound just now?”

“I don’t think so... All I can hear is your deep, buttery voice...”

“Uhh... Should I be concerned...?”

He was so sure he’d heard something. Had he simply imagined it?

“Like, maybe now would be a good time for a quick break,” Kiriya suggested.

And so, since things were mostly wrapped up here, the seven members of the CRC gathered together.

“Yeah, maybe we should eat something. It might help boost morale,” Inaba mused.

“Alrighty then, how’s about we throw ourselves a little party?! Y’know, like a pep rally! Whaddya think, Shino-chan?”

“Ooh, a party? Coming from you, Aoki-senpai, it’s actually a pretty good idea! I’ve never been to a party with this many people before... I bet it’d be a lot of fun!”

“I’m amazed you people want to party at a time like this,” Chihiro retorted under his breath.

“Times like these, people need to let off some steam more than ever,” Taichi explained to him.

“And when you have a party at night, it feels kinda *sophisticated*, y’know? Like we’re gonna drink until the break of dawn!”

“Nagase, I’m pretty sure you’re the only—”

RRRRRIP!

Taichi froze. Likewise, Enjouji shrank down and put her

hands over her ears. “Wh-What was that?! It sounded like someone tore apart ten shirts with their bare hands!”

This time, the whole gym had heard it loud and clear. Everyone was scanning the room for the source of the strange ripping sound.

Then Taichi looked up at the ceiling—and noticed that a chunk of it was missing, as though it had been torn clean off.

“Uh... Isn’t that, like, really bad?! Is it gonna collapse?!” Kiriama shrieked, pointing up at the hole.

But contrary to her concerns, the ceiling showed no signs of caving in. Instead, the gap continued to widen, bit by bit. And as it did, they could see a tear in the dark sky up above. And beyond that tear... was a bright white light.

“Whoa... Is that the real world...?” Nagase murmured. “Wait, what the?” She held out her palm for a moment, then rubbed her fingers together.

Taichi followed suit... and found that his hand was now covered in a light dusting of white sand that was presently raining down from the sky. Then he looked back at the ceiling to find that the gym was starting to crumble and the tear in the sky was growing bigger.

Almost like the world was coming to an end.

“Oh my god, what’s happening?!”

“This can’t be real... What the hell?!”

People were screaming and panicking. Then someone shouted:

“Hey, my phone’s got service again!”

Cell service? Inside the Isolation Zone?

Aoki immediately whipped out his phone. “Huh? Holy crap! I do, too! Maybe we can get through to the real world!”

One of the girls was holding her phone to her ear. “Hello? Oh, hi, Mom!” Then she put her hand over the receiver and shouted, “Guys, she picked up!”

“Look at the date! We’ve gone back in time!” someone else shouted.

Taichi looked at his phone, and sure enough, the date had

been reset to three days prior — the day they first arrived in the Isolation Zone.

Amid the excitement and panic, someone asked, “Is it over?!”

“Is this it? Is this the end?”

“That means no more phenomena, right?!”

“And since the date’s been reset, maybe everything will go back to normal?!”

“We’re going home! I just know it!”

All around the gym, people were cheering.

“Look!”

The tear in the sky had grown even wider, revealing a familiar city nightscape. If Taichi had to guess, it was probably the street right outside Yamaboshi.

They could hear cars driving by. The sounds of human life.

There was no doubt about it. The real world was right there before them.

The crowd’s tentative hope exploded into unmitigated jubilation.

“WE DID IT!”

“It’s the real world! We made it back!”

“Did the phenomena stop?”

“Mine hasn’t happened for a while now!”

The CRC stood there, surrounded by joy on all sides. Was this truly the end?

Then Katori walked over to them. “Looks like you people were right. We all banded together, and now it’s over, just like that.”

That was... certainly how it appeared, at least.

“Can we safely assume we’ve united the world...?” Inaba murmured, still cautious.

“Yeah, I think it’s a little too early to celebrate just yet,” Taichi replied. “Even if we did our part, it doesn’t guarantee that *you-know-who* will.”

“I’m willing to accept that it’s over,” she continued, “but without any proof—”

Inaba cut herself off with a gasp and took off running in the direction of the entrance.

“What is it?!” Taichi shouted as he and the others hastily gave chase.

They followed her out of the gym to the nearby staircase... and that was where they found «Heartseed», piloting the body of Gotou Ryuuzen. Even now, at the climax, it stood there lifelessly, like always.

The CRC were the only people out in the hallway. Everyone else was still inside the gym, rejoicing over their return to the real world, and they showed no signs of leaving.

“The Isolation Zone is over now, right? So we’ll all go back to normal? Right?” Nagase asked, forcing herself to stay calm in the face of deep desperation.

“...Yes... I suppose you would be correct...”

“So we succeeded in uniting everyone?” Inaba asked without missing a beat. It was still too early to relax.

“Yes... That’s correct...”

“So you managed to get everything set up for us? And we’ll be able to keep everyone’s memories intact?”

Just one last step.

“Yes... I assure you... they will not have their friendships erased...”

“They’ll go back to the real world and forget about all the supernatural shenanigans?” Aoki asked, making doubly sure.

“Well... I imagine they’ll forget everything that happened here in this Isolation Zone...”

“What about the people who got hit with an emergency shutdown?! They’ll go back to normal, right?!” Kiriya demanded.

“...All the events of this Isolation Zone will be undone... Therefore, I’m inclined to say they will indeed ‘go back to normal’...”

It was the best-case scenario. What more could they

possibly ask for?

"We did it... We did it...?" Enjouji's voice was devoid of any confidence, but her tentative relief was palpable.

They had gone through a lot and nearly thrown in the towel, but with the power of friendship, they had finally made it.

"So «Heartseed» will get to keep its memories, and we'll get to keep ours?" Chihiro muttered to himself.

"No... We won't keep ours."

What?

That didn't sound right. But surely Taichi must have simply misheard.

"The events pertaining to all of your phenomena... from the body-swap onward... will be undone..."

Undone?

"And everything that happened in between will be erased as well..."

"Wait just a minute, asshole! Don't fucking screw with me right now!" Inaba roared, and Taichi was of a similar mind.

"That's not what you told us!"

"It isn't...? Oh... It isn't, is it..." As it murmured, a faint smile crept up on its face.

"Don't you condescend to me! I thought you said you didn't want to lose your memories!" Inaba grabbed «Heartseed» by the collar. "Now tell us you were joking!"

But «Heartseed» looked utterly unruffled. If anything, it seemed to enjoy getting a rise out of Inaba.

"I *could* do that... but it wouldn't be prudent of me to lie to you..."

"What's... happening...? What's...?" Enjouji whispered in a tiny, feeble voice.

"You're not making any sense!" Nagase raged.

And then a third party joined the fray.

"Oh... you spoiled the surprise?"

It was «The Second», piloting the body of Kurihara Yukina. The timing gave Taichi pause, but he didn't have time to

dwell on it, because more importantly—

“Isn’t there anything you can do to protect our memories, «Second»?!”

He placed his hopes not in «Heartseed», but in the double agent.

“I don’t think so... Sorry?”

Just like that, the last ray of hope was snuffed out.

“So when you said we could prevent any memory loss... you were lying...?” Kiriya asked, defeated.

“Rest assured, nothing of value will be erased as a result of the Isolation Zone... but the prior phenomena... are a different story...”

“So you were screwin’ with us the whole freakin’ time. Go to hell, man,” Aoki growled.

“Come now... Let’s all relax... No one’s going to die, you know... Even *we* can’t erase living beings...”

At this, Taichi finally lost his composure along with the rest of them. “That’s not the issue here! Do you think we’re supposed to be okay with this?!”

“Well, you know... I do not require you to be okay... You may resent me as much as you like... Remember me as your enemy...”

What the CRC should have been fighting was «Heartseed» all along. They were delusional to ever think they could reach an understanding with it.

After all, they were human, and it wasn’t. It had no heart to connect with.

“Fine... At this point, I’ll give you whatever you want. I’ll entertain you for my whole life if I have to. Just don’t erase what we have... or else I’ll never forgive you. Please.”

Inaba was clearly desperate. First she tried bargaining, then threatening, then flat-out pleading.

“...More importantly... shouldn’t you spend your last moments with each other? This is the end, you know...”

In a blink, their surroundings had been overwritten with blinding white light, even the floor. Something was still

there for them to stand on, but to the naked eye, it looked as though they were floating in midair.

“...Now then...”

But before «Heartseed» could finish its sentence, it had already vanished. Taichi turned to look for «The Second», but that one was gone, too. Everything was being... erased. But there was no pain involved. Instead, everything was steadily growing fuzzy, themselves included.

Taichi had hoped «Heartseed» was lying to them... and yet he knew there was no point in lying at this stage.

Everyone was growing distant, and if they split apart, he had the distinct feeling that things would never go back to the way they were ever again. But they were out of time now... so instead, Taichi used the last of his energy to pour his heart out.

He refused to accept that this was the end... but he didn't want to have any regrets, either.

“Chihiro! Enjouji! I'm glad you two joined the club! Aoki and Kiriya: Thank you for being my friends! Nagase, I don't regret falling for you! And Inaba, I love you—”

The white light engulfed them... as they returned to a world where none of it ever happened.

Chapter 7: Heartseed

That morning, on the way to school, there were a lot more students on the streets. Club activities had been on pause for finals week, and the third years had been busy studying for entrance exams, but all of that was over now, and Yamaboshi was back to normal.

It was March — technically spring, although the temperature outside was still firmly in “winter” territory.

“Morning, Taichi!” called a cheerful voice as he felt someone clap him on the back.

“Oh, hey there, Nagase.”

It was Nagase Iori, his club president. She was the prettiest girl in their grade, and talking to her one-on-one made his heart flutter. As usual, her long hair was perfectly styled.

“Have you been studying for finals, Taichi?”

“Not a lot, but a decent amount. What about you?”

“About the same as you. Guess that makes us rivals!”

Nagase didn’t seem like the studying type, and yet she had excellent grades.

“Alright then, you’re on.”

“Winner gets two ‘go buy me whatever snack I want, whenever I want’ coupons! How about it?”

“You want to make me into your gofer...? Alright then. Two coupons it is. But I don’t know how often we’ll get to see each other after finals are over, so we might not be able to use those coupons until the next school year starts.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

They passed through the school gates, stopped at their lockers to change into their indoor shoes, and were on the way to their classroom when all of a sudden—

“Whoa!”

“Ack!”

“Uwacchi!”

—a male student dashed out from around the corner and nearly crashed into them.

“Sorry!”

He inclined his head in apology. Probably a first-year. Another male student ran after him. What were they doing, causing a ruckus first thing in the morning?

“Hey! Tennis team!” a male teacher bellowed from the other end of the hall.

“Oh crap, oh crap!”

“Hurry up, Kimura!”

“Gimme a minute! ...Really sorry about that!” He bowed to Taichi and Nagase, then took off running again.

“Hmmm... I feel like they might need a refresher on the school rules,” a voice murmured.

Taichi looked over to find student council president Katori Jouji standing there, his arms crossed.

“Maybe we could incorporate some sort of incentive campaign into next year’s program?” a bespectacled student offered. If memory served, this was the vice president, Sasaki. He was often overshadowed by the more charismatic president.

“Perhaps...”

Katori’s gaze met Taichi’s. They’d spoken a handful of times in the past, but they weren’t particularly close, so the two of them exchanged a curt nod and went their separate ways.

As they entered Classroom 2-B, they found a pair of girls mid-conversation by the door.

“Setouchi-san, I noticed you still haven’t turned in your worksheet.”

“Oh, that... I forgot it at home. My bad.”

It was class president Fujishima Maiko and notorious

delinquent Setouchi Kaoru.

"Didn't we have this conversation yesterday, too? Get it turned in, please," Fujishima demanded firmly. She was never one to mince words.

"I told you, I *forgot*."

"In that case, I'll message you later tonight so you'll remember to bring it tomorrow. What's your email address?"

"None of your freaking business."

"...Alright then, but you'd better bring it in tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Fujishima fixed Setouchi with a long, suspicious stare, then turned and walked out of the classroom. Then Setouchi rounded on Taichi and Nagase.

"What are you two looking at?!"

"Oh, er, nothing... Good morning," Taichi replied awkwardly.

"M-Morning, Setouchi-san," Nagase chimed in.

Both of them were a tiny bit uncomfortable around Setouchi. This was because, for whatever reason, Setouchi had the tendency to get snippy with people she perceived to be good students. Thus, the two of them decided to hurry to their desks before she caused a scene.

"God, I can't believe you!"

"W-Well, I—Oh, Iori! Taichi! Get over here!"

Just then, fellow clubmate Kiriya Yui beckoned them over to a different group of girls.

"Morning," Taichi greeted her.

"Yeah, yeah, good morning! Now then, don't try to change the subject! This is *exactly* why you and Aoki never got anywhere! You had two whole years and you blew it!" snapped Kiriya's close friend Kurihara Yukina from the track team.

"Okay, well, like, these days it seems like he's not interested anymore, so..."

"Yeah, I get that vibe, too. Nothing you can really do about it. They say timing is key for this kind of thing." Then

Kurihara leaned in. "But I am *not* letting you spend all three years of high school without a boyfriend! You won't have any time for boys once entrance exam season starts up, so you have to get a move on now! See, your biggest problem is that you never approach any of the guys!"

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Kiriyaama laughed nervously.

"And the same goes for you two over there!" Kurihara shouted at Nagase and Taichi.

"Uhhh..."

"Not sure what you want me to say... Ohohoho!"

"You're both attractive and popular, so it makes no sense that you haven't dated anyone! Heck, you could date each other for all I care!"

At this, the two of them exchanged a look. They held eye contact for a few seconds... Then Taichi tilted his head. "I don't know," he laughed awkwardly.

Admittedly there was a point at which Inaba had tried to play Cupid for them, but... yeah.

"Yeah, I get the feeling there's a line between you that can't be crossed... Like you've both got stuff you're dealing with on the inside... Or maybe I'm just overthinking it," Kurihara shrugged, and Taichi felt a strange discomfort in his chest.

But before they could continue, another girl changed the subject.

"Forget all that! Right now we should be talking about finals!" declared Nakayama Mariko, a Calligraphy Club member who wore her hair in outdated high pigtails.

"Oh, come on! Can you really blame me for wanting to think about literally anything else?!" Kurihara shot back. Apparently there was a reason she started a conversation about romance. "I know your game, Nakayama-chan. You're just trying to change the subject before I turn the spotlight on *you!*"

"I... I'm not really interested in that kind of stuff, Yukina-

chan...”

“Oho? What was that little pause just now, hmm? Hmm? ...Okay, I’ll quit teasing. But seriously, all of you — Nakayama-chan, Yui, Iori — you’re all way too pretty to be eternally single!”

The three girls laughed awkwardly in response. Was it really just a matter of poor timing that they hadn’t dated anyone? Or were there other factors at play? If possible, he hoped he’d have the opportunity to help them figure it out someday.

But of course, real life was never that convenient.

“Hey, Yaegashi!”

“Yaegashi!”

After first period came to an end, Miyagami and Sone rushed over to Taichi’s desk. Looking at them from an outsider’s perspective — Miyagami from the Photography Club with his picture-perfect hairstyle, and chubby Sone from the Manga Club — they would appear to be a mismatched duo at first, but...

“We saw you!”

“Having a lot of fun!”

“With the girls!”

“Earlier this morning!”

“Which begs the question!”

“Why aren’t you dating any of them?!”

Then they both exclaimed in unison: “*Loser!*”

When it came to insults, these two idiots were perfectly in sync.

“What do you want from me?” Taichi groaned.

“C’mon, man! It’s just such a waste! You’re on good terms with a ton of girls — if you went for it, I’m sure you could start something with one of ’em!”

“Says the guy who’s never had a girlfriend in his life.”

“I’m gonna deck you, Sone.”

“H-Hey! Stop! I’m on your side here!”

"We're *all* on the same side," Taichi retorted.

"No, see, the thing about you is, you *could* get a girlfriend, but you choose not to. You just look down on us instead. Which makes you even worse than a playboy."

"Dude, harsh..."

"Speaking of, here comes the *real* playboy," Sone muttered, and Taichi looked over to see the star of the soccer team, Watase Shingo, standing there.

"What's up? You guys want me to brag about my girlfriend some more?"

"Nngh... I knew it! He's our true enemy! Right, Yaegashi?!"

"I feel like you're just looking for a scapegoat, Miyagami."

"Relax, people. Relationships aren't all sunshine and roses, y'know. I keep telling her I gotta study for finals, but she keeps nagging me... I guess we've got a bit of a mismatch in our priorities."

Evidently, dating someone from another school came with its own set of problems.



After school, Nagase had cleanup duty, so Taichi and Kiriya headed to the Rec Hall without her. Seeing as it was finals week, the CRC couldn't do much in the way of club activities, but they were still allowed to hang out in the clubroom.

Out in the hall, they spotted a group of girls walking and chatting merrily.

"Misaki, you haven't been studying at all, have you? You're too in love with track, eh? Huuuh? Hnnnnn?"

"Quit nagging me, Yukina! I already study a little bit every day. I just don't feel the need to cram for the tests, that's all!"

"Wow... Misaki is nothing like Yukina... Well, except for their height, I guess!"

It was a group of five girls: Kurihara Yukina, Oosawa Misaki, and three other track team members whose names Taichi didn't know offhand.

"Oh, hey, it's Yui and Yaegashi! Are you guys headed off to study? We're gonna have a little study party ourselves!"

"Uh... You know Oosawa's giving you a dirty look, right?"

"What? Misaki, come on! You said you'd tutor me, right? Right?"

"You drive me crazy, I swear to god." But despite her folded arms, Taichi could tell that Oosawa wasn't really all that annoyed.

"You two are like two peas in a pod, huh?" Kiriya remarked casually.

"What's the matter, Yui? You jealous?" Kurihara shot back quickly. "God, you're adorable. Wanna come with us?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... nah, that's okay."

Kiriya glanced furtively at Oosawa; their eyes met, but in a heartbeat they both averted their gazes in opposite directions.

"Huh? Did something happen between you two?"

"Nah, it's nothing," Kiriya replied, shaking her head.

"Hurry up or we're leaving you behind!" one of the other girls shouted from down the hall.

"Coming!"

And so Kurihara and Oosawa dashed off.

Rec Hall Room 401: home to the Cultural Research Club. Inside, the five second-year members had gathered: Taichi, Kiriya, Nagase, plus Inaba Himeko and Aoki Yoshifumi.

Normally they'd entertain themselves with their own separate activities, but today everyone was hitting the books. The only sounds were those of scritch-pencils and the flutter of pages.

Nearly two years had passed since the club was first formed. Originally it was created purely as a dumping ground for misfits, but then it turned out they all got along

really well, and so a bond was forged. Currently they had finished preparations for their club presentation, which meant they were now free to focus entirely on studying for finals.

Taichi's eyes met Inaba's.

"Hmm? Got a question, Taichi?"

"No, it's nothing."

"Don't be scared to speak up if you're having trouble. Or are you distracted?"

"I just looked up for a second, that's all."

"Keep doing that and you'll end up in third place, behind me and Iori. Pretty pathetic for a tryhard like you."

"I'm not a tryhard! But yeah, I *do* feel like I study harder than either of you... Ugh..."

"Or who knows — maybe *I* will get third place!" Aoki ventured.

"Not happening."

"C'mon, Inabacchan, you don't know that for sure! Not until it's all over!"

This was a very optimistic take, coming from the guy who generally failed every other test. You'd think he was joking, but no — he was dead serious.

And speaking of *dead serious*... Aoki had continually professed his love for Kiriya right from the moment he first met her. It was hard to say how much of it was just him playing around, but considering how many times she'd shot him down and/or ignored him outright, his dedication was mildly impressive. These days, however, his intensity was finally starting to wane. But that was fine, in Taichi's view. Not all crushes were meant to be.

Neither Nagase nor Kiriya joined the conversation, and so the room fell silent once more. Their serious studying continued all the way to their scheduled break time.

"Agh, I'm so tired!" Kiriya collapsed forward onto the table.

"Break time, break time!" Nagase sang to herself as she

jumped to her feet and headed over to the shelf.

Aoki slumped lethargically in his chair, and Inaba cracked her neck. Taichi stretched, hoping to calm the tension in his mind.

“Hmmm. Why are there so many gaps in this photo album?” Nagase asked. She probably grabbed the album entirely on a whim, but now she was flipping through it, looking at the handful of club-related photos they’d stored inside.

“Huh? What gaps?” Kiriya asked.

“Take a look! You’d think we’d put each photo right next to each other, but there are a bunch of blank pages in between for some reason!”

“Whoa, you’re right... Why is it like this? Did one of you take some photos out?”

“Why would we need to do that when we could just print new ones? We’ve got the files on a flash drive,” said Aoki. Indeed, he had a point.

“Well, from now on, let’s make sure not to skip any more pages,” said Taichi.

He wasn’t sure how the album had ended up like that, but he didn’t have too much of a problem with it. Well, as long as no one had deleted the original files, of course.

Nagase was the first to head out, as she had to go grocery shopping for her mom. Aoki was next, claiming that he, too, had an errand to run. And since they’d lost their focus, the other three decided it was time for them to head home as well.

“What’s the plan for tomorrow?” Inaba asked on the way to the school gates.

“You mean, whether we wanna meet up again? Hmmm... Well, it’s nice to have you there, like, in case I have questions, and it’s fun to compete with everyone else, but... I guess we should probably, like, try to study on our own,” Kiriya mused.

"Yeah, we can probably handle the rest at home," Taichi nodded.

"Alright then, no club meetup tomorrow. Hmmm... We'll need to bring in our stuff for the club presentation, but other than that, we might not be back to the clubroom until next semester..."

Chances were good that today was their last visit for quite some time.

Arriving at home, Taichi stopped by the living room to say hi to his little sister, then headed upstairs to his room. He dropped off his bookbag, changed into loungewear, relaxed for a few minutes, then took a seat at his study desk.

A short while later, he wanted to double-check his math, so he opened his desk drawer to look for his calculator.

"Hmm?"

There was a stack of about seven sheets of blank paper, all stapled together. Confused, he grabbed it and flipped through it.

"The heck is this?"

He had no recollection of putting this in his drawer. Why would anyone staple together a bunch of blank paper? Where did it come from?

Since the paper was all blank, he figured it might have some use to him in the future, so he tossed it into the paper tray.

"What the?"

Next, he spotted an expensive-looking notebook he didn't recognize.

"Whoa, this looks really fancy..."

It was far too elaborately designed to be used as an ordinary diary; maybe someone could fill it out like a scrapbook, but even then, Taichi couldn't see himself using it. He flipped through the pages.

They were all blank.

"Did someone give this to me at some point...?"

Even so, he would have stored it somewhere else.

"I guess Mom or Rina must've snooped around in here...?"

Ultimately, this was the explanation he settled on. And with that, he went back to studying.



From there, the days flew by in a whirlwind — studying, studying, break time, then more studying. The worst nights were when there were three different tests scheduled for the next day; he studied so much, he didn't have time to think about anything else. Every now and then his sister pestered him for attention, and he had to shoo her away with the vague promise that they would hang out "some other time." But right now, during finals week, he had no time for hanging out anywhere with anyone.

Then, at long last...

"We're free! No more finals!" Nagase shouted after the final test was submitted. Her energetic voice carried all the way across the classroom, and in that moment, she truly spoke for all of them.

"God, that almost killed me." Behind him, Watase slumped forward onto his desk. "But at least it's over now! Hey Yaegashi, would you wanna — Oh, wait, I already have plans today. Well, would you wanna hang out sometime soon?"

"I don't mind, but... aren't you busy with soccer practice?"

"Super busy, man. But I could make a little time."

Soon they'd be third-years, and they'd have to retire from their clubs altogether. Graduation loomed on the distant horizon. But when would Taichi and the others officially retire from the CRC? They didn't have any yearly competitions, so it was hard to gauge.

He really enjoyed his current club. It was fun, and he got along with his clubmates... but sometimes he questioned whether his time might have been better spent in a more

competitive club. He didn't *regret* choosing the CRC, but he *did* feel somewhat unfulfilled on occasion. Almost like something was... missing.

Not that he could really complain, of course. He had a pretty easy life, all things considered. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if his life would have turned out even better, had he chosen a different path. After all, he was by no means bound to this one. With a slightly different outlook, it was possible he would have made vastly different choices. And maybe those choices would have changed his whole world.

But even if he *had* chosen a different club, he probably still would have asked himself these same questions. After all, the grass was always greener on the other side.

"Got any plans?"

"Wanna go somewhere?"

"No, I've got practice today."

"I'm going home and enjoying my day off!"

"You mean you're gonna waste it with video games?"

"No, stupid! I'm going out to eat!"

Freed from the captivity of finals, everyone was now chatting about their plans for the rest of the day.

"What are your plans today, Taichi?" Nagase asked.

Taichi looked up sharply; he hadn't noticed her standing there. "Uh, I don't really have any. But I'm sick of studying nonstop, so I'll probably take it easy at home."

"Gotcha... I guess all that's left is to practice our solo parts for the club presentation."

"Now that we've got some experience, it shouldn't be as stressful as last year's."

"Yeah... I guess we don't need to meet up today. Where's Yui...? Oh, she's with Yukina-chan."

Kiriyama was busy giggling away with Kurihara, Oosawa, and some other girls.

"Hmmm. I guess I'll just shoot Inaban and Aoki a quick email."

"What about you, Nagase? Any plans?"

“Nah.”

“Alright then.” He couldn’t bring himself to invite her out anywhere. After all, she was a girl, and... yeah. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yup! See ya!”

And with that, the conversation came to an end.

After a quick discussion with Miyagami and Sone about test results and potential spring break plans, Taichi left the classroom. Apparently both of them had some “minor” club activities scheduled for the day, so he headed down the stairs alone. Now that finals were over, the school felt louder and happier than usual.

That is, until he overheard some familiar voices:

“Hey, Chihiro-kun, what do you think it means? Doesn’t it gnaw at you?”

“Even if it does, I don’t remember, so there’s no way to investigate.”

It was Enjouji Shino and Uwa Chihiro, the two CRC first-years. Taichi appreciated their willingness to join their pointless little club, but it felt like they still hadn’t fully opened up to the second-years. They only showed up for club activities on occasion, and they didn’t stop by the clubroom in the mornings. Chihiro in particular had only joined due to Yamaboshi school rules requiring some sort of club participation; he was more interested in going to the local karate dojo.

Taichi was pretty sure neither of them were headed to the clubroom today, so he didn’t feel the need to chase them down.

“What if we just ask them if they have heartseeds?”

“If it’s just a phone call, sure. Man, they’re gonna think we’re obsessed with heartseeds...”

—Taichi’s stomach turned.

What the hell? Why did he suddenly feel... frustrated and queasy and miserable? There was no clear reason for him to

feel any of those things. As he paused to ruminate on it, the two first-years walked off.

But the feelings only lasted for a fleeting moment, so Taichi shrugged it off and headed home.

After that, the days that followed were decently, but not completely, fulfilling. The CRC gave their club presentation. A few more days went by. Then they got their test results back.

Time ticked along, moment by moment, until their second year of high school was nearly over.

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Honestly, I should have ignored it. But I couldn't.

According to one Enjouji Shino, "We can't just let this go. It has to mean something!"

And so there we were, walking down Main Street together, with her blatantly trailing *behind* me rather than beside me.

After we got our test results back, the next three days prior to the closing ceremony were spent going over each and every question on each and every test. Students who did well were free to leave after lunch, but those who scored below a certain threshold were required to stay behind for supplementary lessons. So for me, today was my second half-day. But for some reason, today didn't play out the same way as yesterday. I should have been on my way to the dojo right now, but instead I was here.

For as worthless as this world could be, I'd have to be stupid to waste my time with pointless shit. Unlike some people, I had priorities.

It all started about a week ago, when I found three plastic pouches full of weird little black seeds in the pocket of my bookbag. I had zero recollection of ever putting them there. Initially this creeped me out, but then I figured there must have been some kind of mix-up. Right as I was debating

whether to take them to the Lost and Found box or just toss them, however, Enjouji caught sight of them and said:

“Those seeds come from heartseed vines, don’t they? I have some, too.”

Her story was the same as mine: she found them in her bookbag and had no idea where they came from. They were just... *there*. Was this another mix-up, or was someone pranking us? I figured it had to be one or the other, so I started asking around, but no one had the first clue what I was talking about.

You’d think the story would end there. But then Enjouji asked me if I wanted to look into it sometime and, for some idiotic reason, *I agreed*.

As the days went by, and the closing ceremony got closer and closer, I thought maybe we’d end up forgetting about it until after spring break, but then she approached me about it earlier today. And since I’d already promised I’d help, I let her drag me to the train station, where we caught a train into town to pay a visit to the local garden center. I called them like a week ago just to check, and sure enough, they told me they carried seeds for heartseed vines.

If only they didn’t carry them. Then we would have been out of leads, and our “investigation” would have come to an end. But alas, they did, so here we were.

I glanced over at Enjouji. I could only imagine what the guys in my class would say to me if they knew I was hanging out with a girl one-on-one... That said, it didn’t really feel like a “date,” given she was glancing around even more restlessly than I was. What a dweeb.

“These seeds sure are weird, huh?”

“Yep.”

“...Chihiro-kun?”

Apparently she wanted a real answer. “Yeah, it really makes you wonder.”

At this, her face brightened in relief... and I felt a strange discomfort in my chest.

Why did Enjouji decide to investigate? And why did I agree to help her?

At the time, she explained her reasoning as follows:

—It feels like my normal life might finally get interesting.

“Normal” was certainly apt, both for her life and my own. We were both ordinary people with nothing special going on... but there was a tiny chance we could change that. That was why I joined the Cultural Research Club in the first place. But then a year went by, and nothing ever came of it.

I didn’t want to be like them. There would be no bridging the gap between us; I knew that perfectly well, and yet... at times, I couldn’t help but wonder if I could fit in with them. If it could lead me in the direction of something more. As long as I followed this path, surely there was a tiny, microscopic chance...

We made a right at the corner. Just a few more steps and we would arrive.

Out front, there was a large parking lot completely devoid of cars. Upon further inspection, the parking lot was gated off with a metal chain. Then we approached the doors, where someone had hung a simple, unsophisticated wooden sign:

CLOSED.

“...Looks like they’re closed.”

“S-Sure does...”

The investigation was over. Like a couple of idiots, we had wasted not only our time, but our train fare, too, and there was no taking it back. All we could do now was cut our losses and throw in the towel.

I was delusional to think anything would ever come of this.

“Well, so much for that. I’m leaving.”

“W-Wait, Chihiro-kun! We only just got here! But... I guess... there’s nothing we can really do...”

“If you want to come back tomorrow, knock yourself out, but leave me out of it. What would we even accomplish by visiting the store in person?”

“...I don’t know...”

Deflated, Enjouji hung her head. *Maybe I was a little too harsh just now... not that I care.*

Together, we turned and headed back the way we came, Enjouji silently trailing along behind me. I was pretty sure I hadn’t done anything wrong, and yet I felt like a total ass for some reason.

To force myself out of my dour mood, I took out one of the little seed pouches. *I should just throw them away,* I thought. Then I could be free of this nonsense. Not like Enjouji could make miracles happen, either. The two of us were just a couple of nobodies.

As we walked, I tossed the bag into the air, and as gravity pulled it back down, I caught it. Then I flung it even higher, and after a slightly longer wait, I reached out and barely caught it by the tips of my fingers. Then I threw it as hard as I could, because this time, it didn’t matter if I caught it.

“Wh-What are you *doing*, Chihiro-kun?!”

I reached out — but failed to catch it. Instead, it hit the ground.

“Hey, what’s that?”

I hadn’t realized anyone else was on the sidewalk with us, but as it turned out, a young girl was headed our way. She stopped short and stared at the pouch of seeds. Judging from her height and the kiddy backpack slung over her shoulders, she was in fifth or sixth grade.

She looked up and stared at us curiously. *What do you want?* Her gaze made me uncomfortable, so I bent down and grabbed the pouch. Then she pointed straight ahead, in our direction. Confused, I glanced over my shoulder at Enjouji, but she shook her head. “Not me!”

And so I determined that the girl was pointing at me... or rather, at the thing in my hand. Apparently she’d taken an interest in the seeds. She seemed like a good kid, although her wavy hair was *really* well-styled for someone her age.

“What’s that?” she repeated.

"What, this?" I asked.

"Yeah, what are those? Um... I mean... if you don't mind me asking? For some reason they, uh, seem really fascinating to me..."

Out of nowhere, she started rambling. *Oh boy, here we go.*

"They're just seeds," I replied curtly, then added, "For heartseed vines."

"Heartseed...?" she repeated pensively.

"Have you, um...?" Enjouji began, but then she tilted her head in contemplation. "No, I must be overthinking it... We haven't met before, have we?"

"I don't think so," the girl replied, shaking her head.

For some reason it felt like maybe I *had* seen her around somewhere, but I couldn't recall when or where.

"Was there something else you wanted to ask about the seeds?"

"N-No, that's okay... Th-Thank you anyway!"

And with that, the little girl took off like a bullet.

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Taichi was sitting on the couch, watching TV. The room was so toasty warm, he kept nodding off from time to time. At one point he noticed that he'd slept through almost an entire show, but he didn't really feel like rewinding it, so he just kept watching.

—*Taichi...*

"Taichiiii!"

"Whoa!"

The sudden loud voice made him nearly leap out of his skin. Shaking his head, he willed his brain to process his surroundings. Apparently he was woken by his little sister Rina.

"God, Taichi, you're always so lazy when you get home!" she shouted, her hands planted firmly on her hips. The

backpack on her shoulders suggested she'd only just come home from school.

"...You're home late, I see. Were you hanging out with a friend? And what's it matter to you what I do after school? I'm allowed to relax if I want. "

"No, you are *not!* Just because they sent you home early now that you're done with your finals, it doesn't mean you can just *lie around* the rest of the day! You need to use this time to get some extra studying in! That way you can move up in the ranks!"

"Way to ignore my other question. Who died and made you the boss of me, Miss 'I forgot to do my homework and now I need help'?"

"Th-... That was yesterday! This is today! And *you* have a job to do! Shoo, shoo!"

"Whatever you say, dear. I'll start studying later — I'm on break right now."

But his teasing only further provoked her rage. "Don't you give me that attitude!"

"I get it, alright? Message received."

"No more break! You have to study! *Now!*"

She hauled him to his feet by the arm and dragged him upstairs with her. But instead of protesting, he just went with it — honestly, if he kept watching TV, he'd probably just fall asleep again. She led him into his bedroom.

"Now sit down at your desk and grab your pencil!"

"Why do you want me to study so bad?"

"I need you to get a good job so you can take care of me after my first marriage fails!"

"...I'm gonna hope like hell that doesn't actually happen."

"Well then, you'd better get started! Here, use this!"

Without bothering to ask first, she plunged a hand into Taichi's bookbag and pulled out a notebook.

"Oh, I don't actually use that one. I just carry it around."

"What? Really? It looked pretty worn out to me, though."

Thump. Something dropped to the floor, and Taichi bent

down to pick it up.

It was a small, clear plastic pouch full of black lumps.

“What *are* these?” He opened the pouch and shook out one of the little round lumps. “It’s not candy, that’s for sure... Looks like seeds, if I had to guess...”

On each seed was a small white mark in the shape of a heart. Whatever they were, Taichi didn’t recognize them at all... and given the timing, his suspicions turned to Rina.

“Did you put these in my notebook?”

But she didn’t seem to hear him. She was staring down at the seeds like she was entranced.

“Rina?”

“...Huh?! No, of course not!”

“Really? Because you keep looking at them...”

“I didn’t, I swear! Where would I even get those?! I didn’t buy any, and nobody gave me any... but...”

“Something ring a bell?”

“Earlier today I saw this high school couple — well, actually, I don’t know if they were dating — but anyway, there was this guy who had some of the exact same seeds, and I talked to him about it.”

“You talked to a stranger? That’s dangerous, Rina.”

“No, it wasn’t! The girl he was with seemed really nice! Anyway... his seeds were in a little plastic pouch, just like this one...”

“So he gave them to you, and they fell out of your pocket just now?”

“No! I swear, they’re not mine! They were in *your* notebook!”

“Well, I didn’t put them there. I don’t even know what kind of seeds they are.”

This conversation was going nowhere. If it wasn’t her doing, then how did this pouch end up sandwiched between the pages of his notebook, of all places?

Come to think of it, lately he’d come across some other things he didn’t recognize, too — the stapled stack of

papers, the fancy notebook. Were these things connected in some way?

"Those are heartseeds."

An indescribable feeling spread through every inch of Taichi's body — something intensely unsettling. And then... it faded away.

"Is that really what they're called? Heartseeds?"

"I don't know! That's what the guy told me! If you think I'm lying, then look it up!"

"I mean, I don't care *that* much..."

"Just do it anyway! I want to know if it's true!"

Rina was being overly demanding today. Was this his punishment for neglecting her during finals week? *I guess I'll be spending tonight making it up to her*, he thought to himself as he powered on his laptop and opened a browser window. Then he typed "heartseed" into the search bar. The result: images that perfectly matched the seeds on hand.

"Looks like this guy was right after all."

Cardiospermum halicacabum: a tropical flowering plant in the Sapindaceae family, known primarily as "balloon vine" due to its mostly hollow balloon-shaped fruits, but also known as "heartseed" due to the heart-shaped marks on its seeds.

Sure enough, the pictures showed a plant with thin vines and round, pale green fruits.

"I've heard of this plant before, but this is my first time ever actually seeing what it looks like, you know?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Rina to find her gazing enraptured at the computer screen. What was going on with her? Rarely did she take things quite this seriously.

"Taichi, I..."

For some reason, Taichi tensed up.

"...I was expecting something a lot cuter, judging from the seeds."

Oh.

"Give me a break. You gotta have more to say than that,

right? What's the deal with you and these heartseeds?"

Just then, someone's phone started to buzz. It was Rina's.

"Mmmm... Sorry, but that's all I got!"

"You're the one who told me to look it up! Who's calling you? You don't have a boyfriend, do you?!"

"Buh-bye!"

And with that, Rina skipped merrily from the room. Clearly she needed to be reined in.

Taichi sighed and looked down at the heartseed in his palm.

"All I know for sure is that these seeds came out of my notebook."

He racked his brain, but couldn't remember ever buying them, nor did he know anyone with a gardening hobby that could have given them to him. But since his laptop was already on, he figured he'd do a bit more research. The word "heartseed" just didn't sit right with him.

Then he struck upon the plant's meaning in flower language.

—*Together forever.*

—*A journey hand in hand.*

There were a few other meanings, but those were the two that stuck with him the most. Frankly, he was surprised to learn that this pest plant carried any romantic symbolism at all.

He paused to think. Had he built any friendships in high school that he sincerely believed would last forever? Sure, he had plenty of friends, but... none that were likely to stick around. At what point, then, would he lose them?

All he knew for sure was that he was planning to enroll in the science course and study for college entrance exams. Beyond that, however, he didn't really have a set destination in mind. He didn't know what he wanted to do with his life... but at his age, surely it was impossible to have it all planned out, right? Plenty of his peers were in a similar position. There was no need to panic; he could just figure it

out as he went along.

But without a destination in mind, he couldn't ask anyone to come along with him for the ride. Otherwise, how would he know what direction they were headed?

Ugh, I'm taking this way too seriously. Forget it, I'm going back to the couch.

Taichi closed his laptop — and suddenly remembered another time when he'd felt the same rush of dread. How long ago was that? It felt like forever ago... Nah, it was pretty recent. Nevertheless, he was impressed that he managed to remember such a tiny detail. Clearly it had left a mark on him.

"Didn't I hear Chihiro and Enjouji talking about heartseeds about a week ago...?"



The next day, after first period, Taichi headed for Chihiro and Enjouji's first-year classroom. He knew it wasn't urgent, and yet some part of him just couldn't wait. The problem was, he wasn't sure they would even remember the week-old conversation he was talking about. His hopes were slim.

"I know this is totally random, but... weren't you guys talking about heartseeds last week?"

He was expecting them to give him a weird look and shake their heads, and that would be the end of that. But contrary to those expectations...

"...Huh?"

"Y-Yeah...?"

...they did indeed remember. Not only that, but they seemed rather alarmed.

"Y-You see, we actually went through with those plans just yesterday. We went into town looking for heartseed seeds," Enjouji explained.

"But to be clear, it wasn't a date or anything," Chihiro clarified hastily.

So the two of them were wandering around town... right around the same time as...

"...You didn't happen to speak to a little preteen girl, did you? Long, wavy hair like a magazine model?" Taichi asked offhandedly.

"W-We did, actually! She was really cute!"

Unbelievable.

"If you thought she was cute, then there can be no doubt — that was my little sister. Last night she was telling me about a pair of older kids who were carrying those seeds on them."

"Uh, Taichi-san? You seem to be a little overly invested in how cute your sister is... but let's not get into that. I can't believe we bumped into her... What a crazy coincidence," Chihiro mused.

Not only had they encountered Rina on the street, but Taichi managed to identify them based purely on a hunch. Crazy coincidence, indeed.

"So anyway..." Back on topic, Taichi plunged a hand into his pocket and pulled out the little plastic seed pouch. "I found *this* wedged inside one of my notebooks, and I have no idea how it got there. It wouldn't happen to be yours, would it?"

Their eyes widened.

"Hold on a minute." Chihiro darted back into the classroom, then returned a few seconds later. "I knew it. That's *identical* to the ones I have!"

Resting in his palm were three more seed pouches, all full of heartseeds.

"And Enjouji has some of her own, too."

"Y-Yes, that's right. I only have two, though."

Altogether there were six pouches in their possession, for a total of approximately 50 seeds.

"In that case, it sounds like I ended up with one of your pouches by mistake. You can have it back."

Relieved to have found the source of the seeds, Taichi

happily offered the pouch back to its proper owners. But they didn't take it. Instead, they looked downright *perplexed*.

"Well, the thing is... we don't actually know where these things came from."

Wait, what? "What do you mean?"

"Uh... exactly what it sounds like?"

"Y-You didn't give them to us by any chance, did you, Taichi-senpai?"

"If I did, then I wouldn't be asking you!"

"Nnn... I'm sorry..."

"No, it's okay. I'm not mad or anything. I just don't remember where I got this, so I'm worried I took someone else's stuff by mistake."

"Same with us. We tried looking into it, and we even found a place that sells them... but when we got there, they were closed."

"Gotcha..."

Apparently the seeds belonged to a third party... but who? And why were the seeds divided up into exactly six pouches? And... why heartseeds?

After that, nothing else was gained from the conversation. Both Chihiro and Enjouji claimed to have no knowledge of how they acquired their seeds, and when they attempted to track the source, they hit a dead end. The mystery had only deepened.

Frankly, Taichi was still fairly convinced that his seeds had originated from the large quantity in the first-years' possession. Or maybe it was some kind of prank. Either way, there was no real harm done — so why not simply let it go?

Well... for some reason, he felt like there was more to it. Like there was a fascinating story just waiting to be unraveled. And maybe... just maybe... it would add a little spice to his fulfilling, but otherwise ordinary, life.

With a tiny speck of hope burgeoning in his chest, Taichi

went back to the classroom and showed the heartseeds to Watase.

"What am I looking at?"

"They're heartseeds. I found them in my bookbag last night and have no idea where they came from. Do you know anything about it?"

"No idea."

"...Yeah, I figured."

Well, obviously it wasn't going to be that easy. During the next break period, he approached his other friends.

"Miyagami! Sone!"

"Yeah?"

"Hmm?"

Then he asked the same question he posed to Watase.

"You're asking if we know anything..."

"...about *heartseeds*?"

"No way, man. I don't have the first clue about gardening stuff."

"I've never even heard of them before."

"Got it. Well, thanks anyway."

Already, Taichi was starting to have second thoughts about asking around. It felt pointless, and he was tempted to throw in the towel... but he couldn't let it go just yet. Next, he approached Ishikawa Daiki, the baseball player.

"Sorry, but I don't know anything," he replied with a shrug, and Taichi didn't see any reason to press further.

He asked a few more people after that, but gained nothing in exchange for his time.

"What are you even talking about?"

"Why would you ask us if we know about your seeds?"

Truth be told, even he didn't really know why he was doing it.

Now he was out of leads. Defeat set in, and his hopes for a "fascinating story" were set to end as nothing more than a fantasy. But right as he was about to call it quits...

"Kiryama, can I talk to you?"

...it occurred to him that the two other people in possession of these seeds were both fellow CRC members. Thus, perhaps he would have better luck asking the people in his club.

"I found these heartseeds in my bookbag, tucked inside one of my notebooks, and I don't know how they got there. Do you know anything about it?" he asked, holding up the pouch for her to see.

"Heartseeds...? Oh!" Her expression brightened as she took the pouch from his palm and held it up to eye level. "Wow! They've, like, got little hearts on them! That's so cute!"

"...So you don't recognize them or anything?"

"No, I don't. Sorry."

With that, his hopes were officially dashed. He thanked her and walked away.

"I guess I was wrong."

Now that he'd completely exhausted all his potential leads, he figured he may as well leave the rest to Chihiro and Enjouji. Considering all the pouches they had, he got the sense that they were closer to the source than he was. All he could do now was let this made-up "mystery" go.

"Whatcha got there, Taichi?"

A pair of inquisitive eyes peeked over his shoulder. It was Nagase Iori, president of the CRC.

"Oh, uh... just some seeds. Heartseeds, to be exact."

"...Heartseeds...?" Unlike everyone else he'd spoken to, Nagase put a hand to her chin in contemplation. "Something about that name... doesn't sit right with me."

"Huh?" Could Nagase have the answer he was looking for?

"I don't know why, though."

"...Oh." Taichi slumped his shoulders in disappointment. He'd really gotten his hopes up that she knew something, and now he was completely devastated.

"C'mon, don't act like it's the end of the world! What's so

special about some seeds?”

“Well, you see...”

Nagase listened intently as Taichi recounted all the events that had led up to this moment.

“Hmmm... That’s fascinating. Like a little mystery!”

“Yeah, but no one knows anything about them, so I’m out of leads.”

Right as he was about to give up at last, however, Nagase stopped him.

“Now hold on a minute, Taichi. We might as well ask the rest of the club about it, don’tcha think?”

It would seem this strange little story was far from over.

Just like yesterday, school let out after lunch that day. And with no more classes left to attend for the rest of the school year, spring break was practically upon them. Some students headed off to take part in club activities, while the rest started making plans with their friends.

Meanwhile, the five second-years of the CRC were all gathered in Rec Hall Room 401, which was nothing short of a miracle considering Aoki was failing in multiple subjects. Luckily he’d passed the tests that were reviewed that day, and as such, had no obligation to sit through remedial lessons.

“Club presentations are finished, and after tomorrow’s closing ceremony, the school year’s officially over. We’re not scheduled to have any club activities until late March, when we need to discuss member recruitment... and yet you seem to have summoned us all anyway. *Isn’t that right, Taichi?*” Inaba growled.

Maybe he was making a big deal out of nothing. He could’ve just stopped by Inaba and Aoki’s classroom and asked them about it there. But to be clear, this wasn’t exactly his fault...

“I wasn’t the one who did it!”

“Oh really? Because Iori said *you* wanted us all to get

together.”

“Whoopsie!” Nagase struck a cutesy pose that was obviously fake.

“*Nagase!*” Taichi hissed, but his anger quickly faded. “You know what? Forget it.”

“You always let Iori get away with murder...” Inaba clucked her tongue in frustration. *Eeek*. Apparently he’d only further incited her rage.

“Oh, please. I saw that li’l smile on your face when you found out we were havin’ a surprise meetup,” Aoki teased.

“Are you *spreading lies about me*, Aoki?”

“M-My bad! I’m sorry! I guess I was seein’ things!”

They all seemed so busy lately, and the number of club meetups had dwindled in recent months, but evidently no one really objected to hanging out today. *If I’d known, I would’ve asked sooner.*

“So you have something you want to talk about, Taichi?” Kiriyaama asked.

“Well, I already asked you about it, but...” He set the pouch of heartseeds on the table.

“The heck are those?” asked Aoki.

“What am I looking at here?” Inaba blinked.

So Taichi gave them the full rundown.

“No clue, man,” Aoki shrugged without missing a beat.

“Oh, wow. I didn’t realize you were, like, hung up on it. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help,” said Kiriyaama offhandedly.

But Inaba was... trembling...

“You called me up here... and wasted my time... over *this...?*”

Trembling with rage.

“And what really adds insult to injury is the fact that they’re *heartseeds*, of all things! ...Why does that bother me so much?”

So then, this specific type of seed had made her especially furious...

“Hold on a minute! Doesn’t it make you wonder where

they came from? Even Chihiro and Enjouji were thrown for a loop! Maybe it has something to do with the club!”

“Logically speaking, Chihiro and Shino are the closest to the source, since they have a lot more than you.”

“Right... And apparently they’re going to spend today expanding their search...”

Hence they weren’t present for today’s meetup.

“Then why’d you have to go and waste our time with this?!” Inaba leapt to her feet.

“Now, now. Calm down, Inaban,” Nagase grinned. But then Inaba rounded on her next.

“If anything, it sounds like *you’re* the one who made a mountain out of this molehill, Iori! Honest to god, I should’ve known it was you!”

“Whoa, whoa!”

Nagase recoiled sharply — and her elbow collided with her bookbag, sending it straight to the floor, where it spilled its contents.

“Ack!”

She flinched from the sound, then rose from her chair and started tidying up the mess she’d made.

“Careful,” Taichi cautioned her as he joined her efforts.

Likewise, Kiriama followed suit. Then she paused and picked up a folded paper pentagon. “Wait, is this one of the things you dropped?”

Its shape was too perfect to be a scrap of something else.

“Uhhh... Hmm. I’m not sure. I don’t recognize it.”

Nagase took the pentagon and opened it up. Apparently something was inside.

A small black speck fell to the table with a tiny *thud*.

But no one reached out to take it.

They were all too busy staring at the rest of the little lumps cradled inside the folds of the paper pentagon.

Black lumps... with white hearts.

Heartseeds.

“...Is this some kind of coincidence?” Inaba muttered. But

the tone of her voice suggested she thought otherwise.

"I don't remember putting these in here. Not at all," said Nagase.

"Wait... Nagase, the paper!"

Taichi's gaze drifted past the seeds to their makeshift envelope.

"It's... a map...?"

Nagase tilted the pentagon and poured the seeds into her left hand. Then she unfolded the paper on the table. Sure enough, it was some kind of map printed off the internet. At the center was the local hospital.

"You got some kinda connection to this hospital, Iori-chan?" asked Aoki as he looked down at the map.

"I don't even know if this paper is mine... but I definitely can't think of any reason I'd need to go to the hospital."

"Wh-What the heck is up with these stupid heartseeds? Is this some kind of prank? I'm literally freaking out here!" Kiriyaama shrieked, rubbing her arm with one hand.

"Is there some deeper meaning to it...?"

"What kinda 'deeper meaning' could there be, Inabacchan? Is someone tellin' us to go there?" asked Aoki.

"Okay, but why be so *convoluted* about it? Why not just write a note that says 'go to the hospital'?" asked Kiriyaama.

"Maybe there was a reason they couldn't write it flat-out... Yeah, maybe they were barred from speaking or writing!"

"And yet they were free to buy heartseeds?" Inaba retorted.

While the other four continued to hypothesize out loud, Taichi ruminated on his own.

"Why heartseeds, anyways? Talk about obscure," Aoki commented.

"The little hearts are really cute, though!" Kiriyaama gushed.

"And if you draw eyes on it, it kinda looks like a monkey!"

"Can you people please stay on topic?" Inaba hissed.

Meanwhile, Taichi continued to think.

"I mean, nobody's got any ideas," Aoki replied.

"Maybe the pentagon was made out of scrap paper that just happened to have a map printed on it?" Kiriya suggested.

"Well, I don't know what they expect me to do with these seeds... other than plant 'em, I guess," Nagase shrugged.

On a whim, Rina had pulled out a notebook Taichi normally never touched. Inside, they'd found little black seeds. And earlier that same day, Rina had encountered Chihiro and Enjouji, who were in possession of the very same seeds. As a result, Taichi took an interest in the seeds himself.

The next day, when Taichi went to speak to Chihiro and Enjouji about it, he learned that his clear plastic pouch of seeds matched theirs exactly. He tried asking his classmates about it, but no one had any leads. But right when he was about to give up, Nagase stopped him. Then she dragged him to the clubroom... at which point they discovered heartseeds in her bookbag.

Each of these details was minor and inconsequential — well, except for the heartseeds, maybe. But without that exact sequence of events, without that perfect timing, they never would have made it here. And in that sense, it felt like a miracle. Like destiny.

Of course, if he admitted this out loud, anyone he told would probably laugh at him. After all, he was clearly reading *way* too much into it.

Nothing that happened in his life would go on to have global repercussions, and from that perspective, his life was undeniably meaningless. Likewise, this series of events was equally insignificant, and if he let it go, it would fade into obscurity, like any other mundane minutia.

But what if he decided, apropos of nothing, that it *was* significant? Obviously it wasn't, but... what if?

Time ticked by, flowing past in a single stream until eventually it disappeared beyond the horizon. That was how

life worked. But given all the coincidences that had lined up here, Taichi felt compelled to ask a single question:

“Does anyone else feel like they’re forgetting something?”

Never had he imagined his question would have such a dramatic effect. Instantly the room was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. Everyone looked like they’d been struck by lightning.

Something was different. Something was happening. Something was changing. All because of Taichi’s tiny suggestion... because he chose to speak his mind.

“What if we went to that hospital?”

But that tiny first step was enough to change the world.



And so the five second-year members of the Cultural Research Club caught a train to the local general hospital. They walked in through the front doors, entered the recently refurbished lobby, and... came to a stop.

“So, uh, where do we go now? We don’t have anything to go on,” Nagase muttered, staring up at the directory sign hanging from the ceiling.

“Why the hell did I come here? I must be stupid,” Inaba grumbled.

“I don’t know, but I only agreed to this because you did,” Kiriya replied. “Like, I know you wouldn’t have signed up for it unless you thought it was a good idea.”

“I beg your pardon? Don’t pin this shit on me, Yui. I only caved because *you people*—”

“Relax, ladies! Think of it like a picnic!” Aoki grinned.

“What kind of psycho goes on a picnic at a hospital?!”

“For now, let’s just take a tour through all the areas visitors are allowed to access,” Taichi suggested.

“I blame you, Taichi! This was *your* stupid idea in the first place!”

“Yeah, well, everyone agreed to it. Including you,” he shot

back.

She scowled, but didn't argue further.

Truthfully, Taichi was on edge. Not only had he acted purely on a hunch, but he had dragged everyone else into it, too. Looking back, he didn't quite understand what was going through his head at the time. It was unbelievably reckless.

"Well, if I'm being honest... when you asked us if we were forgetting something, I can't deny that it hit me like a ton of bricks," Inaba grumbled in admission.

And so they wandered aimlessly through the hospital building, starting with the first floor. Obviously they couldn't poke around in the patient rooms, so instead they stuck to shared spaces. But it was a hospital, and there wasn't much to look at. So they just... walked. Nothing really jumped out at them.

"Has anyone been here before?" Inaba asked the group. The response was a unanimous *no*.

"What about you, Yui? Have you ever gotten injured from karate?" Nagase asked. But of course, Kiriya had not been involved in karate in many years now.

"Yeah, but only minor stuff, like, stuff they can handle at my neighborhood clinic."

"Looks like we might hit a dead end," Aoki mused quietly. And his observation was on point.

Taichi felt completely ill at ease. If they came up empty-handed after all this effort, Inaba was sure to tear him to shreds. He was so sure they would find something here, but he didn't know where to look or even what he was looking for. Maybe it wasn't inside the hospital at all. Or maybe they'd already passed it without realizing. There were countless possibilities — what if the map really was little more than a piece of scrap paper? He could only pray that wasn't the case.

They arrived at the second floor, started their rounds, and a few minutes later, they were done. Meanwhile, Taichi's

mood was starting to take a nosedive. Was there really no deeper meaning behind the map and the seeds?

“So, uhh, where are we now?” asked Kiriya as she led the way into a smaller room. “Seems like some kind of waiting room—”

Then she gasped, and it set off warning bells in Taichi’s head. His heart fluttered in his chest, convinced that something wasn’t right. Hastily, he rushed over to the entrance. “What’s wrong?!”

The room was devoid of any human life — just vending machines and empty benches.

Then a sharp pain erupted in his skull, like someone had stabbed a needle into it.

Images — floated to the forefront of his mind — overlapped — with his surroundings — past and present — matched up —

I’ve... been here before?

“What’s... going on...?”

“Wait a minute,” said Inaba, furrowing her brow. “I feel like I vaguely...”

Beside her, Aoki clutched at his hair. “Yeah, it’s weird... Almost like... like I know this place...”

“What *is* this place, anyway? And what the heck was I doing here?” Kiriya asked, bewildered.

But as for Nagase...

“Why...? Why?! Why, why, *why?!?*”

...she looked completely unhinged, clutching her head and whipping her long hair in all directions.

“Iori, what’s wrong?!”

But Inaba’s voice didn’t reach her.

“I... I know this place... I *know* I know it! I cried here! My heart ached! But I smiled, because... something good happened? But what? I don’t...!”

“Stay calm, Nagase!” Alarmed, Taichi grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Wha... Huh...? Taichi...?”

She froze stock-still, as if he had somehow switched off her mental breakdown. This came as a relief, but at the same time, he wasn't sure how to follow up. "Uhhh... Take some deep breaths, okay?"

She stared at him, her expression unwavering. Then it occurred to him:

"Oh... Sorry, didn't mean to get all handsy with you!" He hastily moved to relinquish his grip on her shoulders.

"Wait."

She grabbed his hand. Her fingers were warm and soft and—

A jolt of static shot through his body. Electrified, he froze in place as she stared directly into his eyes. Then her pretty pink lips started to move. Slowly. Seductively. Provocatively.

"Hold me."

It took a minute for the words to sink in, and even then, Taichi's mind was a blank slate. In his place, the rest of the group reacted for him.

"What?!" shouted Aoki.

"What for?!" shouted Kiriya.

"...Don't be ridiculous," muttered Inaba.

"Just do it, okay?! Th... This is embarrassing for me, too, y'know!"

Nagase's cheeks flushed pink — evidently she *did* have a functioning sense of shame after all — but nevertheless, she insisted. And that was all the reason Taichi really needed.

"O-Okay... Here I go..."

Timidly, he reached out... then hesitated... then summoned his courage and drew his arms in, closer and closer, until finally they were wrapped around her body in a warm embrace.

"You're actually doing it...?"

He could hear Inaba grumbling somewhere in the background, but her voice felt distant.

This was his first time holding a woman, and as such, he didn't really know what he was doing... but at the very least,

he endeavored to be gentle. And in return, what he felt was warmth — and sadness.

Sadness?

Not only had he experienced these feelings before... he *cherished* them.

Slowly, he pulled away from her. Her eyes were shining with strong-willed determination. For a moment they gazed at each other... and it was that connection that gave them the confidence to say:

“We hugged each other here in the past.”

The other three stared at them, slack-jawed. The silence felt as though it would last for all eternity... but it didn't, of course. Eventually this frozen moment in time began to thaw.

Then Kiriyaama started squealing — literally. “Wh-... What are you talking about?! Nobody told me about this! Have you guys been dating this whole time?!”

“No way, man... Y'know, that really makes me think... I've been tryin' my best to get over Yui, but for some reason I just can't,” Aoki muttered, although he seemed to be getting off-topic.

“G-Guys, wait! We're not dating! Really! All I know is, me and Taichi definitely held each other right here in this spot at some point in the past... The question is, what led up to it...?”

“So you and Taichi *did* come to this hospital?”

“Uhhhh... Well, I don't *remember* ever coming here, but... but it was definitely this spot! Right, Taichi?!”

“It's a mystery to me, too. I thought maybe I was just misremembering, but no — the exact same thing happened, right here, in the past. I can say that for certain. That being said, though... for some reason, your body feels different compared to last time...”

“Her body *feels different*?! Oh my god, Taichi, you pervert!” Kiriyaama shrieked.

“That doesn't make any sense, though... My body hasn't

changed at all that I'm aware of... If anything, my boobs have gotten bigger... so what are you comparing it to?!"

"Wow, Iori! Way to humble-brag! Ugh!"

"Don't worry, Yui! Your speed bumps are perfect just the way they are!"

"This isn't about me!"

Nagase burst out laughing. "Oh man, all this bickering really takes me back! We used to be like this all the time, remember? So... what changed?" She frowned, puzzled.

Kiriyama and Aoki exchanged a furtive glance, then averted their gazes in opposite directions.

Then the mood in the room turned viscerally uncomfortable, in a way that was hard to describe. But it wasn't a negative feeling; if anything, this was a heartwarming moment. So why had it taken so long to finally happen? That was the mystery at hand. Why hadn't they pursued their desires?

All they had to do was make a tiny effort, and it was right there within reach. Was there some sort of reason that had kept them from taking action? Or was it a series of tiny coincidences that kept them from reaching each other? If so... was it too late to make things right?

Make things right? How? By doing what? The idea was absurd.

Taichi's memories were a blur. Something — something was wrong — with the world. The world was different — they were different — they'd forgotten — but — not entirely.

No matter how tiny these fragments were, they were still something.

And so Taichi saw a tiny thread of light shining down in the darkness. And if he didn't hold on to it, it could vanish at any moment.

The thread trailed off in a single direction, with mountains and valleys like a heart rate monitor. Taichi followed it slowly, cautiously, like it might snap at any moment. Where did it lead? He squinted into the distance... and then, at last,

he saw it.

The thread tied the five of them together. Their bond was more than skin-deep. Their hearts were connected... by a shining light.

"I remember now."

Together, the five of them voiced the answers they'd found inside.

"Something happened inside that building... and I was there... but what...?" Kiriya muttered.

"Yeah, I was in a building... No, I went to see Nana? And *then* I went to that building?" Aoki murmured to himself.

"I was... I was at some kind of abandoned factory...?" Nagase mused.

All of them seemed to have some specific location in mind. Taichi did, too. But the place he envisioned was far, far away...

"Taichi," Inaba called. He wasn't sure why she was calling for him, but regardless, she seemed calmer than the others. "There's this one place on my mind — I can't get it out of my head. I think I have to go there."

"You too, huh?"

Something told him that if they went there, they'd have an experience just like this one. They would find something.

"Anyway, you're coming with me," Inaba continued casually.

"Wait, what?"

+++

Each of us had a destination in mind, so we split up and headed out.

At the hospital, after watching Taichi and Iori hold each other, something descended over the CRC... or maybe something rose up inside us. Either way, different images filled each of our minds, and we all swiftly agreed that we should go to those places.

Frankly, it was downright eerie. A series of strange occurrences put a certain location in each of our heads, and now we were just going to *go there* for no reason? Normally I would never do something like this... and yet, at the same time, part of me was *certain* that it was what I needed to do.

Either way, I'd see for myself once I got there.

And so I caught a train I normally never took, debarked at one of the most deserted stations, then took a bus all the way to the foot of a mountain... all while dragging Yaegashi Taichi with me.

"Why are we going on a picnic all of a sudden...?" he muttered to himself beside me.

For some reason, I felt that I needed him to be there with me. Couldn't tell you why—but then, I couldn't explain *any* part of this. It wasn't worth agonizing over. Besides... when I saw him with his arms around Iori, it made me queasy. So in a way, this was just my way of making him pay for that.

"...Maybe we should've worn different clothes for this."

This hiking trail was intended to be family-friendly, and the slope was nothing we couldn't manage... but still, hiking in a starched uniform was less than ideal.

This was the same mountain we visited during our first year of high school for a field trip. At the time, we hiked along the trail to the facilities halfway up the mountain, then split into our assigned groups and made curry. The whole CRC had been present: me, Iori, and Taichi in one class, Yui and Aoki in another.

"It's too late to run home now. Remember last time? You, me, Nagase, Watase, and Fujishima were all in the same assigned group... Wait, but why was *Fujishima* with us?"

"Can't remember. But knowing her and her hard-on for responsibility, she probably joined us so our group wouldn't be shorthanded or something."

The pointless chatter ended there, and we hiked the rest of the way in silence.

It wasn't often I spent a lot of one-on-one time with this

guy outside of the clubroom. Being alone with someone generally made me uncomfortable, since I tended to worry about what they secretly thought of me. But right now, I wasn't worried about Taichi.

It was a weekday during the off-season, so naturally the trail was deserted. It felt like we were the only two people left in the world. Then we reached the end.

Up here at such a high elevation, it was fairly chilly. The outdoor facilities featured stoves and sinks — enough to cook simple meals — but as with the trail itself, no one was out here in the cold using them.

"Well, here we are... but I haven't remembered anything. Have you?" he asked.

"Stop talking for a sec."

Obviously I didn't want to have come all this way for nothing. *Just give me a minute. Be patient. Don't rush me.* Facts and logic wouldn't help me here. I needed to feel...

Wait, what? Feel? Why would I choose emotion over rationality?

"Want to have a look around?" Taichi suggested, and I figured it couldn't hurt, so I agreed. Following my faint memories, I walked to the stove our group had used.

"They look like ordinary outdoor cooking facilities to me. I'd hate to have to use these dilapidated ones."

"They're not *dilapidated*, they're just old. And they already renovated half of them."

"...Wait, I remember now. Our group was forced to use one of the grody ones — all because *you* lost at rock-paper-scissors!"

"I... I tried my best, okay?!"

"I'm not sure about that. You're so bad at it, it's freaking absurd."

My mouth practically moved on autopilot. Almost like my body was going through the motions before my brain could catch up. Weird.

"Lay off me, Inaba. I can win if I really try! Rock, paper,

scissors!”

“Whoa!”

It was so sudden, I threw out scissors on the spur of the moment — and my fingers brushed his.

“Ugh, I lost... Anyway, sorry for bumping your hand.”

I could hear Taichi talking — but my brain hadn’t processed it. All at once, I was swimming in emotion. My body was so hot, it was going to explode... like a supernova. It was out of my control.

“Huh...? What’s wrong, Inaba?”

Fuck. Don’t look at me!

I couldn’t bear the thought of him seeing the look on my face right now, so I covered it with my arm. It was mortifying. I was breathing heavily, and my cheeks were burning beet-red. *Wait, why’s my sight going fuzzy? Am I tearing up? This isn’t me... I’m never this girly!*

And yet—

“What am I feeling right now?!”

“Inaba, what’s wrong?!”

I caught a glimpse of lori’s shadow — the ghost of someone who wasn’t here. Once upon a time, she said something to me... gave me something I pretended I didn’t want, but deep down, craved more than anything else. I learned I didn’t need to put up a tough front to earn people’s respect, so I decided I would just follow my heart and be myself.

I love you... I’m crazy about you... I’m head over heels for you... I adore you... You mean so much to me... You complete me... I’m yours forever...

Raw passion flooded me all at once. Where was it hiding all this time? Or was I just asleep? I couldn’t take it. Now that I was finally awake, I couldn’t close my eyes to it anymore. Not for the world.

I looked up. Taichi was standing there.

This was the man who taught me the meaning of love—

+++

Near Inabacchan's house was an abandoned building four stories tall, located in an area "currently under rezoning," according to a sign outside.

"This is it. There's no doubt about it."

Me personally, my memories were still fuzzy, but Yui sounded pretty dang sure, and I trusted her judgment.

At the hospital, one specific place had come to mind: this empty building. 'Course, Yui got mad that she was lumped in with me. *Sorry, babe — there's no fighting fate.*

Right from the moment I first met her, I knew it was destiny... and yet that "destiny" never seemed to roll around. But deep down, I knew there was still a chance.

The interior of the building was pretty clean, all things considered, but it was kinda obvious the place hadn't been touched by human hands for at least a year. Even the "Slated For Demolition" sign was starting to fade. So what did this place have to do with me?

Suddenly, a jolt of electricity shot through my brain. *Building. Interior. I know this place. We hid here... We hid here? Why? I don't know!* I could feel myself getting lightheaded, but I snapped myself out of it.

"Wanna check it out?"

And so the two of us looked for a way inside. Minutes later, we found an unlocked window on the first floor. It was so easy, it almost felt like a trap. *This has gotta be totally illegal*, I thought to myself. But I could worry about that later; right now there were more important things at stake. So in we went.

There wasn't much junk inside, but it was super dusty. Our pace slowed.

"Ugh, I wish I brought a face mask... Aagh!"

Just then, I slammed my foot into a cardboard box sitting on the floor. *Ouch.*

"Will you quit getting dust everywhere?! God!" Yui

snapped.

“Nngh... Sorry...”

But for some reason, this little exchange felt familiar... and it warmed my heart.

Starting on the first floor, we worked our way through the building. Some doors were locked up tight, but most were wide open; we looked through each of 'em in turn.

“Anything ringin’ a bell?” I asked with my hand over my mouth, but Yui just shook her head.

So we went up to the second floor and repeated the process. Part of me wondered what we were even doing here, but I wasn’t about to ask. I just kept searching for something that would hit me like a ton of bricks. After all, I knew it was out there, and as long as I had faith, I would find it eventually... right?

We moved on to the next room. Then the next. Working our way through.

“Alright, next room,” Yui declared as she led the way. Although she could be a pretty opinionated person, she generally preferred to let others take center stage, so this was kinda unusual for her.

“For once it’s just you an’ me,” I mused quietly, since it wasn’t a common event.

“...Wha?! Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?!” she shrieked, backing away hastily.

“Nothing! I was just makin’ an observation!”

I screwed up. I should’ve known there was nothing Yui hated more than being close to or alone with me.

“Yeah, I know. I know you wouldn’t do anything like that.”

But today, for some reason, her smile was sweet and gentle. Since when had she ever opened up to me like this? It was a sad thought, but hey, better late than never—

“Wait... How am I so sure about that...?”

“D-Don’t worry about it! It’s important to trust your friends!”

Right now we had a good vibe going. But if I'd just put in a little more effort, couldn't I have clicked with her like this a lot sooner?

Yui moved to another door and opened it; I followed her inside.

First impression: *Wow, it's a lot cleaner in this room compared to the others.* The other rooms had junk all over the floor, like you'd expect in an abandoned building, but not this one. There were eight work desks lined up side-by-side, like an old office or something.

"This room — huh?"

And then I saw something. Flashes of stuff that wasn't really there. Memories of blankets... a kerosene heater... a lantern...

Wait, what? Memories? I didn't know *how* I remembered them, but somehow I did.

My biggest priorities rose up before me. I had a philosophy: to make each moment the best it could possibly be. But at some point, I gave up and settled into the role life had handed me. How could I have let that happen? I could have made things different if I had just stuck to my guns — so why didn't I? It was a mystery.

I mean, it was all so simple. I wanted nothing more than to go back in time and tell myself: *Grow a spine! Trust your gut! In a world as complicated as this one, what else can you truly believe in? As long as you know what you want, you can make it happen.*

At least, that was how I felt. Was I right, though? Couldn't tell you.

Sure, maybe I took my sweet time figuring it out — or remembering, in this case. But I knew for a fact it wasn't too late to start again. All I had to do was say the magic words. Difficulty level: Casual Mode.

It was time to make my feelings known to Yui.

"Sorry, this is sudden, but... there's something I want to say."

Yui looked up at me, puzzled.

I'm going to tell her.

"I, Aoki Yoshifumi, am still madly in love with you, Kiriya Yui. I just want you to know that."

+++

I reeled from the impact, barely avoiding a KO. It was taking all I had just to hold my ground. Because the sudden confession from Aoki had nearly knocked my soul out of my body.

Wait, wait, wait. Why is this happening?! I wasn't expecting this at all, so I was severely unprepared. I was just about to remember something, too, but then he distracted me!

Okay, let's just set it aside. Just let it go and move on. I'm sure someday, when I'm ready, I'll have a real answer for him... someday...

Hey, me. How long are we going to keep running away?

Aoki had professed his love for me since we were first-years. But at this rate, he was going to stop saying it... Er, not that I *wanted* him to keep saying it or anything! Well... maybe kind of!

But I didn't confront it. I didn't come to terms with it. And this was how I turned out. It could have been more, but I let it slip through my fingers. Who knew human emotions could wield so much power? With this, I could have changed something. How much had I ignored all this time? The world was full of fleeting wishes — I just didn't have the strength to face it.

Some things were straightforward, while other things were complicated. But if I did my best to accept it, surely I could handle it in the end. And those feelings made all the difference. All I needed was a little courage... but instead I was a coward. I never, ever, *ever* took the initiative, and ultimately that was what sealed my fate.

So if anyone was going to rewrite that fate, it would have to be me. It wasn't too late — I knew that from experience.

And so I found the words I needed to give myself a kick in the pants.

"I'm done running. I'm done dragging my feet. And I'm done being coddled. I'm gonna fight my own battles. I'm gonna move on."

I was going to accept it... No, I was going to take action! So I stormed right up to Aoki—

"Huh?!"

—and slammed into him with a hug.

"...Uh... wha...?"

He was speechless.

I could feel a large, warm body... and I could hear the pounding of a heartbeat. Was it Aoki's? Then what about mine? Was mine throbbing even harder? I couldn't tell the difference. The two of us were joined together as one...

Wait, what?

"WHAT AM I DOING?!" Flustered, I shoved him away. "Wh-Wh-Why am I clinging all over you?! You're a guy! That doesn't make any sense!"

"D-Don't ask me, man! You're the one who did it! What was I supposed to do?!"

"Nothing! Just... be your normal self, like always!"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?!"

Well, obviously the normal Aoki was — *wait, what the?*

I could see two different futures ahead of me...

+++

Why is my secret memory about an abandoned factory, of all places? Couldn't my brain have picked somewhere cooler? I snarked internally as I made my way there. Not that I really cared, but... I mean, Inaba got to go with Taichi, and Yui got to go with Aoki... *I'm lonely, dang it!*

I didn't know the exact location, so I went home, hopped

on my bike, and raced around the vicinity of Yamaboshi until I found it. The place was solidly built, yet clearly unused — the perfect place for a bunch of thugs to hang out, if this was a manga. I kicked out my kickstand, parked my bike, and headed inside.

The rusty door reluctantly slid open. Inside, the air was musty and humid; I could see some machinery and steel drums in the far corner, but the center of the room was completely barren. I glanced up at the window and noticed that the glass was broken.

Right, I remember now. That was the spot where I watched the action unfold. At the time, I cursed myself for being a passive bystander, and yet I couldn't do anything about it.

But today, I wasn't up there. I was right here... in the same spot I stood back then. At least, according to my new memories — although I couldn't explain how I knew they were mine. It was a bizarre sensation, to say the least, but one I could trust.

At the time, I got the sense that it had taken a lot of willpower. But looking back, it would've been all too easy to come here; it wasn't even that much of a walk.

My philosophy was this: If you know what you want to do, then go for it. All that matters is how you want to go about it. It's okay if you struggle. Just fight through your failures, make a total ass of yourself, then pick yourself back up again and push onwards. No "best," "worst," or "normal" necessary. Once you've set your mind on something, you've basically already won.

All that was left now was to walk around inside this factory. Pretty simple stuff. Just one small step, and we would gain something — or *regain* something, as the case may be. Because it felt like we were forgetting something.

But as long as we didn't give up, I was confident we could remember it someday.

+++

Maybe these heartseeds are more important than we thought.

All of us in the CRC were forgetting something, and there were important hints buried at locations with special significance to the club... At least, that was what Iori-senpai told me over the phone. She said she was planning to call Chihiro-kun next, but she didn't need to, because he was already standing right there with me. The two of us were investigating the heartseeds, just like yesterday.

"Chihiro-kun! I think it's safe to say these seeds are important after all!"

"Just because Nagase-san says so doesn't make it true," he argued back. But that was probably just his *tsundere* side talking. *Wait, what? He's tsundere?* I couldn't remember for sure, but the thought made him a lot less intimidating.

Today we had gone back to that same garden center that was closed last time. Sure enough, they had heartseeds in stock. And when we asked if anyone had bought any recently, the clerk pulled up the store's sales data and told us they'd made two heartseed-related transactions in the past month... but they had no way of knowing who those customers were.

So Iori-senpai's tip had come at the perfect time, since we were out of leads anyway.

"Can you think of any important locations, Chihiro-kun?"

"Like what? We never went anywhere as a club."

"Well... yeah, but..."

The five of them were just so perfect. Their light drew us in, like moths to a flame. But all we could do was admire them from afar. We didn't even go with them to their "summer camp."

"Yeah, I guess we mostly hung out at the clubroom. As far as offsite events are concerned, well..."

"We did go to the nature park that one time. But that was

before we joined, I guess,” Chihiro-kun muttered.

This was the only special location we could think of.

So there we were, at the nature park. Once upon a time, me, Chihiro-kun, and the rest of the CRC had taken part in the track team’s marathon and barbecue party for... some reason. But that was the point at which we decided to formally join the CRC.

“I can’t believe we *actually* came here,” Chihiro-kun lamented quietly. Which was weird, because I seemed to remember him suggesting it.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure there must be something here that we’re forgetting.”

“How can you take her word at face value?” he asked me dubiously.

I wish you would stop harping on about this. I’m tired of repeating myself.

“...Let’s just trust her, okay?”

My voice came out all watery, and Chihiro-kun’s brow furrowed.

“This could be our only chance. We can’t let it slip away.”

Our only chance to—

“O-Okay, let’s get going, then,” Chihiro-kun muttered brusquely, and stalked off. But I got the sense that he was trying to be at least a little bit considerate of my feelings.

There were a handful of other visitors scattered around. Technically it was still wintertime, and it could get pretty cold on cloudy or windy days, but apparently these folks were eager to go on a springtime stroll. Together, Chihiro-kun and I entered the park.

“Oh, this is it!”

This was the spot where they’d set the starting line for the marathon; I recognized the big tree nearby.

“Not to dredge up ancient history, but... why the hell did we all run that stupid marathon?”

“That’s not important, Chihiro-kun! Do you feel anything?”

Anything?" I asked hopefully, even though I hadn't found anything for myself.

"Nope... C'mon, don't give me those puppydog eyes. It's not my fault, alright?"

"S-Sorry..." I didn't mean to make him feel bad. Sadly, I hung my head.

Once I recovered, we set off again. All was quiet, save for the swishing of grass underfoot as we walked along the perimeter of the park.

"...Well, we've made a full lap around..."

"Maybe we should go in deeper."

And so we kept on walking. It was a pretty big park, so if we wanted to check all of it, it would take quite a while. There were a lot of spots to visit.

We walked along in silence. I had faith that something was hidden here... but every now and then, my anxiety welled up inside me, casting doubt on my conviction. Was I deluding myself again? I kept hoping against hope that my fiction would become reality. Would it ever be the real deal? Or would it only ever be fake?

I always imagined myself changing things — making something happen — but those things never manifested in real life. This time, though, there were signs that this was real. Our senpai believed in it. And I wanted to believe that this was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Why were my experiences all fabricated delusions? Would I *never* find something real? Was I just not good enough compared to my senpai?

That which I believed to be real always transformed into an illusion, vanishing into thin air right before my eyes.

By the time we reached a dead end, I was completely out of breath. Chihiro-kun hadn't spoken in a long time now. So what was on his mind? Somehow, I got the feeling he was thinking about the same stuff I was. After all, we were two peas in a pod. Alone, we probably would've given up by now, but together, we could hold out a little longer.

“Let’s make a left this time instead of a right,” Chihiro declared, and set off again. Hastily, I chased after him.

Walking, walking, walking.

That which I believed to be real always transformed into an illusion. Transformed? In that case, couldn’t the illusions transform into something real? Well... maybe. But sitting around wouldn’t make it happen.

I took a step forward, then another, then another. I walked and walked and walked, hoping that with each step, the fake would become the real deal. I didn’t have any proof that it was possible, of course, but all I wanted was a tiny change. And while one step was a tiny amount of progress on its own, if you stacked up a bunch in a row, you could go pretty far. Farther than you thought was possible.

We were passing through the thicket when on a whim I looked over my shoulder — and a split-second later, an image rose vividly to the forefront of my mind. I looked over at Chihiro-kun and found him shaking. A bit *too* hard, actually. Then I realized I was shaking, too.

“I was so desperate to find that asshole...”

“I... I vowed to fight... to change the world...”

This was where I had an unbelievable, impossibly fictional, but very real experience.

Because this was where the two of us met «Heartseed».

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They were all forgetting something — Yaegashi Taichi was now fully convinced of it.

On that mountain, Inaba had remembered a little, although she didn’t tell him the details. And he had seen fuzzy images in the back of his mind — images of Inaba challenging Nagase to a cucumber-chopping competition, or elbowing him in the gut... *Hmm*. All of them were less than flattering memories of Inaba for some reason.

He didn’t remember any of this happening, and yet at the

same time, he *did*. It was completely contradictory. The timelines were unraveling.

Once they reached the foot of the mountain and regained cell service, their phones lit up with emails from the other CRC members, detailing the new information they'd acquired. Each of them had remembered something at their chosen destination, and as they recounted these stories, Taichi found that he somehow remembered them happening, even though he didn't remember being present for it. But make no mistake — these memories weren't simply *faded*. No, it felt like they were uncovering things that were *overwritten entirely*.

Each time someone regained a missing piece, it was restored for the rest of the group. Did they all have a collective memory or something? The most vivid of these new memories was the one Chihiro and Enjouji had restored: the memory of «Heartseed». No, not the plant. This otherworldly being had no physical form, and yet it existed nonetheless.

What exactly was it? What had it done to them? Where was it now? Nobody knew for sure... but they remembered interacting with it. It had inflicted all sorts of grueling trials upon them, and in response, they had banded together to fight back. This happened again and again, until at last they established some sort of alliance with it — but in the end, all Taichi could remember was an intense feeling of rage.

Then Inaba suggested they all meet back up and share their memories with each other. After all, it felt like all these tiny individual pieces would come together to form a bigger picture. But she and Taichi had just spent the afternoon hiking up and down an entire mountain, and as such, it was already late in the evening.

She was eager to meet up as soon as possible, but he insisted on swinging by his house first. There was something he wanted to pick up... and since he was unable to visit the place that came to mind back at the hospital, this was the

next best thing. Eventually she conceded, and Taichi hurried home.

He deboarded the train at his usual station, then ran the whole way to his house.

As time passed, the memories grew sharper and clearer. They still didn't have all the details, but they could remember how they felt at the time, and they were eager for the moment when it would all make sense. They couldn't wait a single second longer.

The things Taichi had regained were things he never should have lost in the first place. He'd never given it much thought before, but his life felt so *empty* now that he knew what he'd been missing. Granted, he wasn't complaining, per se. If he had to guess, the things he lost probably wouldn't have impacted his life *that* dramatically.

The place he remembered was in Hokkaido, the location of their school trip. Something deeply important had happened to him there — enough to change him as a person, no exaggeration. And since everyone else was remembering important stuff at their chosen locations, he was tempted to go to his, even though it was ridiculously far away.

But then Inaba reminded him of the photos they'd taken over the trip, and a moment later, he remembered he still had one of the things he acquired there, stored in a long, thin box. It probably wasn't there the last time he opened his desk drawer, but now it would be. And it was proof of a priceless bond.

Beneath the sunset, Taichi raced down the street and into his house, where he found Rina staring at him from the stairs.

"Wh-What's the matter, Taichi...?"

"You played a big part in this, so thank you," he told her, pausing to ruffle her hair as he passed her on his way up.

"Be more gentle! Ugh!"

Contrary to her complaint, however, she was still smiling.

He rushed into his bedroom and went straight to his desk, where he opened the drawer. Sure enough, it was there. He grabbed it and packed it into this bookbag.

His mother was home early from work that day, and on his way out of the house, she called out to him: "Are you going out again? Will you be home for dinner?"

"Yes and yes," he replied as he stepped back into his shoes.

"Any requests?"

"Curry!"

Once again, he deboarded the train and started running. *Almost there.*

He hit a red light and came to a stop. Then it turned green, and he took off once more. He was so close, he could taste it. Soon, he would be back where he belonged.

Even if they lost their memories, it didn't mean the events were truly *erased*. There was always some faint trace left behind.

Through the darkness of twilight, he could see Yamaboshi High School up ahead. This school building contained two years' worth of memories for each of them; he passed through the gates for the umpteenth time in his life, then cut across the athletic field.

At this hour, club activities had ended for the day, but there were still a handful of people on campus closing up shop. They all looked at him in alarm, but he ignored them. Right now, it didn't matter what they thought of him.

He ran in through the front entrance and passed through the West Wing in the direction of the Rec Hall. Fortunately the teachers were still in the building, but soon the school would close, and they'd all have to go home... Still, the CRC couldn't possibly imagine meeting up anywhere but the clubroom.

And so he arrived at the four-story Rec Hall, a rickety building that needed some serious earthquake retrofitting

before it fell apart, according to the rumors he'd heard during his first year. Then, in his second year, he heard the school was starting to consider demolishing it altogether, but ultimately nothing ever came of it.

His heart ached. For some reason, the simple act of looking up at the Rec Hall provoked a deeply emotional response, but why? It didn't make any logical sense; it was just a building. And yet... to him, it was more than that. This was the place where he had built something truly special — bit by bit, day by day.

All human lives had purpose. There was no such thing as a pointless act. And eventually, those tiny fragments added up into something that could change the whole world.

Taichi ran up the stairs, one step at a time. He'd climbed this staircase so many times, he could do it with his eyes closed. Each time he reached a new landing, he turned and kept going. Up, up, up.

Was it humanly possible for a person to rise up four stories unassisted? No. But with the help of a sturdy structure, the “impossible” was suddenly within reach.

Arriving at the fourth floor, Taichi headed for the first room: 401. He couldn't see inside or hear any voices, but he could feel their warmth radiating from inside. What they had built together had turned into firm bonds that kept them connected, and it drew him in.

There was just one last missing piece of the puzzle.

Gazing at the A4-size printer paper bearing the words CULTURAL RESEARCH CLUB, he reached out and opened the door.

Inside was Nagase Iori, and Kiriya Yui, and Aoki Yoshifumi, and Uwa Chihiro, and Enjouji Shino—

“Taichi!”

“Taichi!”

“Sup, Taichi!”

“Taichi-san!”

“Taichi-senpai!”

They all called out to him.

Then he made eye contact with Inaba Himeko. Wordlessly, she rose to her feet. Now the seven members of the Cultural Research Club were together at last.

Taichi set his bag down and pulled out the long, thin box. For the first time, he lifted the lid. Then he grabbed the chain and held it out in front of him.

The pendant was a comma-shaped *magatama* made of blue glass with a swirly pattern. Beyond it, he could see a glint of sparkly scarlet... and realized Inaba was holding up a red version of the same necklace.



The two pendants were the exact same shape. Red and blue, sparkling like stars, symbolic of their mirrored feelings. There was only one thing left to say.

The hands on the clock spun backwards as Taichi summoned his soul.

Conviction. Vision. Agency.

Then, at last, he said the words his whole life had built towards:

“I love you, Inaba.”

And the next thing he knew, he was engulfed in a white light.



The five members of the CRC were in the clubroom. Outside the window the sky was dark.

It felt like they had gone on a long journey in another dimension and only just made it back home.

Today's date: the day before the closing ceremony.

Their memories had gone back to normal — meaning they had regained their memories of everything related to «Heartseed». For a while they sat there and confirmed the sequence of events with each other, just to be sure, but as far as they could tell, everyone was on the same page.

Judging from what they now knew, it seemed they had won the battle inside the Isolation Zone... but once they returned to the real world, their memories of «Heartseed»'s phenomena were erased. Two weeks had passed since then.

“What the hell is going on?! Get your ass out here, «Heartseed»!” Inaba fumed.

And the next moment—

“You called...?”

—«Heartseed» appeared, piloting the body of Gotou Ryuuzen, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Everyone exploded all at once.

“This time you’ve crossed a fucking line!” Inaba roared.

“Quit screwing with us!” KiriYama shrieked.

“I’m gonna punch your freakin’ lights out!” Nagase shouted.

“But... I... Well...”

“Sorry, but you can’t expect us to forgive you for that,” said Taichi.

“You’re gonna wish you never pissed us off, bro!” Aoki declared.

“It’s unfortunate you chose to lie to us,” said Chihiro.

“N-Now it’s time for you to pay the price!” shouted Enjouji.

Together, the seven of them circled around «Heartseed», who backed up against the clubroom door like the coward it was.

“Yes, but... please listen... I... I’m sorry.”

...Obviously this apology didn’t solve everything, but it was a good start.

“So what’s the deal with that alternate version of the world where your actions never impacted us? Was it the real world? Or an illusion? Or some kind of parallel universe?” Inaba demanded.

As usual, «Heartseed» stood there lifelessly, with no visible emotional reactions.

“Of course it was the real world... Everything in this world is ‘real’... It simply contains a multitude of alternate possibilities... and some of those shifted around...”

“Shifted around? So you’re saying the world can be rewritten?”

“...Sure, let’s go with that... Anyway, now you will all live out your normal lives... and you’ll never have to worry about it again...”

Evidently <Heartseed> had no interest in speaking further about the subject. And when you were dealing with this fickle entity, sometimes you had to know when to cut your losses and move on.

"I must say... you've all done well..."

"*Done well*, my butt! We literally forgot *everything*!"
Kiryama spat furiously.

"Yes, but... now you remember it again... Though I admit, it was a massive gamble..."

"So you *let us forget on purpose* on the off-chance that we'd remember it again? That was your gamble?" Inaba asked.

«Heartseed» nodded firmly. "I knew if you tried to simply *pretend* you had forgotten... «The Third»'s group would see right through it... so my only option was... to let them erase it with the hope that you would regain it... although I had no guarantee that would happen..."

Inaba stared back, stunned. "So you didn't even know if it would work?!"

"I was aware that... something similar had happened in the past... but I wasn't certain whether I could intentionally make it happen... and worse still, once you lost your memories, I lost my own... so in that sense, I've only just 'returned,' like the rest of you..."

"Well, couldn't you have just explained all that in advance...?!"

"What I needed most of all... was for everyone to band together... If you knew that nothing you did could prevent you from losing your memories... would you still have worked as hard as you did? Surely you wouldn't have been willing to trust me... Oh, and... I was hoping that... if I made a dramatic emotional impact on you right at the very end... it might linger on in your minds..."

"Fine. Whatever. I get that this was all part of your plan. But I will say this: it fucking *infuriates* me that it actually worked."

"That said, I did put a lot of small details into place... hoping you would find them... but it was through your efforts... that it all went off without a hitch..."

Frankly, it was hard to celebrate.

“So we made it through by the skin of our teeth...?” Taichi muttered. It felt like a stroke of pure luck more than anything.

“Yes, but... with this, we probably won’t have to worry about «The Third»’s group...”

“Key word: *probably?*” Nagase asked.

“Either way, we can just beat ’em all over again!” Aoki declared.

More importantly, there was something else they needed to make sure of: Had the rest of their friends regained their memories — or “records” — of the phenomena-related events?

According to «Heartseed», the moment all seven of them officially regained their lost memories, those memories were unlocked for everyone else involved. The only exception was the Isolation Zone and the related events, since they were phenomena beyond «Heartseed»’s control.

“...Thanks to your hard work, the number of emergency shutdowns was kept to a minimum... thereby ensuring that undoing them was the more convenient option...”

Long story short: they had successfully kept everyone safe, themselves included.

“But they don’t remember the Isolation Zone, right? Are those events erased now?”

“Indeed, they don’t remember them... but that doesn’t necessarily mean they were erased...”

“Hnnn... So it’s possible they might find something that helps them rediscover those memories, the same way we did with the heartseeds...?” Enjouji whimpered.

<Heartseed> nodded.

In other words, the memories of the Isolation Zone were still out there, and under the right circumstances, it was possible for other people to regain them. But perhaps the majority of people would assume it was all a dream...

Looking at it that way, maybe the only real difference between memories and fantasies was the way people chose

to interpret them. The world was full of countless possibilities, after all.

“Possibly, yes, because we can’t erase living beings...”

So *that* was how the seeds survived the Record Wipe. For as omnipotent as «Heartseed» and its ilk liked to pretend they were, they couldn’t lay a finger on any living organisms — plants included.

“Nevertheless... once something has seeped into the human heart, it truly leaves a mark... I was expecting you to lose a few bits and pieces, but... instead, you gained it all back... But then again... it’s all interconnected, so... I suppose it worked like a domino effect...”

Indeed it had. It all started with a tiny thread, but once they grabbed hold of it, it led them deeper and deeper until everything had changed.

“You know, it’s kind of incredible to think that the mere act of us regaining our memories actually rewrote the rest of the world,” Taichi commented.

“Well, I should think it was only natural... seeing as you people were the central pillar of this world... Oh, but... only in this one instance, of course...”

Their story was apparently over now, so maybe it didn’t matter anymore.

“Is this the last time we’ll ever have to deal with you?” asked Chihiro.

“...Yes, this is the end...”

Did those words carry sentimental value for «Heartseed» at all?

“So we’re finally free from you, eh? Honestly, after getting a look at what the world would’ve been like without you... I’m kind of scared of what will happen when you’re gone,” Inaba muttered, and Taichi was inclined to agree.

Regardless of how they arrived at this point, the fact remained that «Heartseed»’s impact on their lives was preferable to the alternative.

“Well, it was all really just a tiny series of... missteps, I

suppose you could say...? Even in a world where I never approached you... if you had made different choices at certain points, it's possible you still would have ended up here... or maybe not..."

Out of all the possibilities in the world, they had somehow managed to encounter the supernatural being known as «Heartseed», and although they had slipped off the path for the past two weeks, they had finally made it here. This was everything they wanted. Now all they needed to do was move forward.

"Now I think that about does it for... our final conversation, don't you agree...?"

«Heartseed» looked around at the seven members of the CRC, then slowly turned to leave.

"Who even are you, anyway? Or *what* are you?" Inaba asked.

This was probably the last question they would ever get to ask it. But would «Heartseed» actually answer?

"...Good question."

Apparently not.

"All I can say is... we enjoy watching you humans. Your confusion, your pain, your hesitation, your contemplation... your epiphanies, your discoveries, your faith, your betrayal... your failures, your successes... All of it."

"But we don't need supernatural phenomena to experience those things," Inaba pointed out.

So why go to the trouble of conducting these "experiments"?

"We need it to be... more dramatic... Otherwise we cannot fully comprehend it..."

Were these concepts really that alien to the «Heartseeds»? And for that matter, even if they *did* comprehend it all, what would happen then? If that was their goal, then...

"So, did you finally achieve humanity?" Taichi asked, probing.

«Heartseed» tilted its head. “Who knows...?”

But for some reason, Taichi didn’t mind it shrugging him off like that. After all, it was exactly the sort of thing «Heartseed» would do.

“I hate to admit it, but... you and your ilk are all basically omnipotent, right?” Inaba sighed. “So if you’re so much better than us, then what exactly do you believe you’re missing?”

“It’s true that humans are not omnipotent... There is much they cannot do... They are imperfect creatures who lack stability.”

“Harsh,” Taichi retorted.

“But they are changing,” «Heartseed» insisted. Its voice was uncharacteristically firm, and its usual lethargy was gone. “And change is progress. From the perspective of one who is fully evolved, that progress is valuable, regardless of what direction it’s headed. But you humans can evolve both individually *and* as a species... and that is what makes you so wonderful.”

This was different from «Heartseed»’s usual fixation on all things fascinating. This, unmistakably, was an opinion based on emotion. So in that sense... wasn’t it already human?

“We will 100% definitely never cross paths again... Thank you for everything.”

And so, after all the trouble it had caused them, the all-powerful supernatural entity quietly left the room—*with a smile on its face*.

And that was how the story of «Heartseed» ended.

Epilogue: Where Our Bonds Take Us

Springtime rolled around for the third and final time.

It was the day before the opening ceremony, and a big event was on the horizon for the new second- and third-years of Yamaboshi High School... but as for Taichi, he was still feeling lazy after spring break, and as such, he was running late. The assembly started at 9:30, and he wasn't sure he was going to make it. Gasping for breath, he ran down the road.

"Excuse me, coming through — wait, what the?!"

He could hear footsteps racing after him, and he slowed his pace.

"Hey there, Taichi!"

"M-Morning, Nagase..."

"Morning! You know you're gonna be late, right?"

"I think you mean *we're* going to be late!"

"Oh crap, you're right!"

As they joked, they soon arrived at the school gates.

"Well, it's okay if I'm late... as long as *you're* later!"

"It's not... a competition... Nagase...!"

...But if it *was* a competition, then he didn't want to lose to a girl. Together, they raced across campus.

Initially he wasn't planning to put his full effort into it, but given Nagase's natural athletic ability, he didn't have a choice if he wanted to keep up. Before he knew it, they were both scrambling like mad. The scenery flew by in a blur, but they didn't stop to look at it. They were both focused on the path ahead of them.

"Wait... Where are we going again...?"

“Weren’t we supposed to meet up outside the gym?!”

By the time they joined the crowd, they were both wheezing.

“What happened to you guys?” Kiriya asked, frowning.

“We were having... the battle of a lifetime...” Nagase replied between breaths.

“Hah hah hah! I get it! You were just that excited to see the new class assignments!” Aoki grinned obliviously.

Indeed, today the faculty had posted class rosters for the new school year.

“You seem pretty pleased with yourself,” Taichi muttered. Then it hit him. “Oh.”

“You know it! Guess what... Me and Yui are in the same class again! Yessss! Gimme a high-five, Yui!”

“Ugh! Don’t embarrass me!”

“Aww, don’t be shy! Oh, and you’re stuck with us too, lori-chan.”

“Wh-... SPOILERS! I wanted to see for myself, dang it!”

The three of them had all chosen the humanities course for their third year. By the sound of it, they’d managed to end up in the same class as well.

“Yaegashi-kun.”

“Eeeegh?!”

“I don’t know what sound that was, but please don’t do that again.”

“Then don’t sneak up on me and whisper in my ear!”

Unsurprisingly, it was Fujishima Maiko, her glasses glinting in the sunlight.

“It appears we’re in the same class again, which means we’ll have officially spent all three years of high school together. That’s a lot of time spent in close proximity... At this point, there’s *bound* to be some drama between us, don’t you think? Heehee.”

“Or we could skip the drama and just stay friends...”

“Oh, Katori-kun! I noticed you’re in the same class as us

this year.”

“Hey there, Fujishima.”

Katori Jouji, the student council president, walked over to them with a charming smile on his face.

“I forget — do you know Yaegashi-kun?”

“Sure, we’ve talked,” Taichi replied, looking at Katori. Had he truly forgotten the events of the Isolation Zone, or...?

Nahhh. Couldn’t be.

“I’m looking forward to the rest of the year,” Katori told him, and held out his hand. Taichi grasped it, and the two exchanged a firm handshake.

From there, it was Taichi’s turn to check the bulletin board and see the class assignments for himself.

“Misaki! This year’s going to be so much fun!”

“Heck yeah! But you’d better study, Yukina!”

Kurihara Yukina and Oosawa Misaki exchanged a fistbump. Evidently they’d been assigned to the same class.

“Yaegashi-kun! Can we trade classes...? We can’t, can we? Nnnn...” whined Nakayama Mariko as she grabbed him by the sleeve.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ishikawa-kun and I got assigned to different classes... That’s why I want to trade with you... Nnnn...”

“I wish I could help you, but I don’t think that’s allowed...”

“Now, now, Nakayama-chan, that’s enough of that. I mean, Ishikawa-kun chose the science course. Of course you two weren’t going to end up in the same class!” Setouchi Kaoru pointed out calmly.

“I know, but... don’t you understand how I *feel*, Kaoru-chan?!”

“Yes, yes, of course. Now let’s go. Sorry for the spectacle, Yaegashi-kun.”

“Just because *you* get to be in the same class with Shiroyama-kun doesn’t mean—”

“Th-That has nothing to do with anything!”

Apparently Nakayama and Setouchi were in the same

class together... in which case, Setouchi was going to have her hands full.

"Even though we'll be apart, we'll always be friends!"

"Yeah!"

"Damn right!"

"...What's going on here?"

"Oh, hey, Yaegashi. We're pretending to have a dramatic farewell. Wanna join?" asked Watase Shingo.

"Get in here!" Miyagami shouted.

"Let's do it!" Sone chimed in.

"For the record, Miyagami and Sone are in one class while you and me are in another, so I feel like it's pretty evenly balanced."

"We're in the same class?"

"Oh, have you not seen the list yet? Go check it!"

"That's just what I was on my way to do."

"Well, hurry it up!"

"Hurry up!"

Goaded on by Miyagami and Sone, Taichi approached the bulletin board.

"Oh, and fun fact: Fujishima-san is in our class, too," Watase whispered. "I'm planning to finally make a move on her this year, so... I'd appreciate some backup."

His expression was unusually serious, and Taichi felt compelled to hold up his end of their agreement... even if Watase didn't remember it.

"Hey, Uwa! Are you excited to be in the same class as Enjouji-san?! Because I can't wait for you two to end up together!"

"Will you keep your voice down, Kimura?!"

Taichi couldn't see the second-years, but he could hear them shouting excitedly. *Note to self: ask about that later.*

Then, at last, he made it to the bulletin board.

"Let's see... What letter are we this time...?"

If the students were listed in alphabetical order by surname, then he knew he was going to be at the bottom.

Sure enough, there he was: Yaegashi Taichi, right below Watase Shingo, listed under Class 3-E.

He worked his way up the list of names, some of which he recognized, and wondered what sort of vibe his third-year class would have. And as he approached the top half of the list, he saw it...

“Taichi!”

A sweet, passionate, gleeful-yet-bashful voice called out to him a short distance away as his eyes landed on her name: Inaba Himeko.

He turned. She was smiling; her eyes were shining with love and excitement. So he ran to her and called her name right back.

“Himeko!”



A lot has happened in our lives thus far, and there’s still a lot more to come. «Heartseed» and its kin are still out there, probably wreaking havoc in some other part of the world.

Each day is eventful in its own right. From a global perspective, those events are insignificant... but if enough of them add up, they can change the world.

What we experienced was truly unique. And we can’t pretend it didn’t play a role in getting us to where we are today. But to be honest, I think we still could have made it here on our own if we played our cards right. After all, regardless of what inspired us, this path is still ultimately the product of mundane human actions. Nothing special about that.

Does it take a supernatural phenomenon to summon a little courage? To break out of your shell? To change your perspective? No. Anyone can do those things. And that’s all it really is, when it comes down to it.

There are limits to what a single human being can accomplish... but at the same time, we’ve learned that we

don't *need* to be anything more than what we are. So I'm going to spend today living my life, just the same as I always have. If I spend each day interacting with people — which, given how life generally works, will probably be the case — those moments will build connections. And as those connections get stronger, they'll evolve into unbreakable bonds.

Every connection, be it weak or strong, leads to another connection, and another, and another until slowly but surely, the whole world is unified by a single invisible thread. With all the war and conflict that happens around the globe, you may find it hard to believe that that thread exists, but it does. I know this because I've witnessed firsthand the power of human connections. And that power can change the world... at least, a small world, anyway.

But if you have a little faith, I'm confident it could change something bigger, too.

Tomorrow's world will be a wonderful place created by wonderful people — which means we have to start building it today. Our heart-to-heart connections will lead us to something better and brighter than what came before.

Will we meet «Heartseed» again once we get there? Ideally, I hope not. I'm still not sure if my memories are 100% accurate. But that's okay. What we've built can never truly be erased.

«They» may not be human, but I want to believe that we can reach an understanding with them if we try. And if our world allows for connections with non-human entities, then connecting with fellow humans will be a piece of cake!

Just have a little faith... and keep working toward tomorrow.

The End

Afterword

Good gravy, this book was long!!! Figures that the finale would be longer than any of the others!

Thank you so, so much for reading this far. I can only imagine how much of your time I've taken up with my series. But without your support, *Kokoro Connect* never would have made it this far! I can't thank you enough! Signed, yours truly, Anda "KokoroCo" Sadanatsu!

Just kidding.

As much as I'd enjoy closing out my series with that sort of chipper tone, I figure I should take this a bit more seriously, seeing as it's the end and all. Then again, I *did* get pretty sentimental in the last volume... Oh well.

That being said, I feel it's a bit inappropriate for the author to comment on a story that belongs to the characters who told it. That's the way I look at it, anyhow. That's why I never really talked about the subject matter in any of the afterwords thus far, and I don't foresee that changing anytime soon.

So instead, while I have the chance to share this moment with you, I'd like to tell you a bit about myself. Think of it as a rare opportunity... because it is!

See, I still don't think of myself as a "real" author. Not just because I'm reliant upon artists and designers to help get my books published, but because I seriously doubt I could write something marketable without input from editors and proofreaders. I require a *tremendous* amount of assistance to get my works out there. And because of that, I feel like an amateur.

But in spite of that, I still take pride in the books I've written. And if I'm proud of them, then I'm allowed to charge

money for them, because they're worth it! Think about it — wouldn't it be extremely disrespectful to the people who love my books if I *wasn't* proud of them?

Sure, there are countless great stories out there that dwarf mine considerably. But in my opinion, as an author, I'm obligated to proclaim mine to be the very best. I know they have a lot of flaws, but if I sat around waiting for my stories to be perfect, then they'd never get published at all. So yes, I'm a work in progress, but I'm gonna put my books out there anyway because I gave it my best effort, damn it.

That said, I have trouble outright declaring something to be my "best effort." Partly because I always start to question whether I *actually* gave it my all, and partly because I'm terrified people will look at my work and say, "That was your *best*? Yikes."

Now then, how do I feel, looking back at the series I've written? Well, there are tons of parts that sucked, parts that still needed work, and parts that I should have written differently altogether... but I don't feel the desire to turn back time and do it all over again. All the little steps I took thus far have led me to this moment, writing this afterword, and I don't want to invalidate that hard work. I may be an amateur, but I still gave it my best effort, and after perusing some reader critiques, I believe that effort made an impact on at least some of you. (Not to brag or anything.)

I occasionally see people saying "I'm amazed he can write that level of cringe." Not in a disparaging way, but more of a "His storytelling is immature" sort of way, or at least that's the impression I get. And yet, those immature stories are what got me here. I feel like if your book doesn't get haters, then it hasn't made enough of an impact to change anything.

And speaking of "what got me here," it would be remiss of me not to mention the multimedia franchise my series has spawned: manga, drama CDs, an anime (they made 17 episodes and even had a theater showing), and ultimately a

visual novel. At this point, *Kokoro Connect* has a world of its own, and I'm starting to think it's beyond my control...

But in this new world, I know there will be new doors to open and new experiences to discover. I have benefited from this multimedia project in a lot of ways, and for that, I am tremendously grateful.

That being said, it's now much too large for me to get a handle on all of it, and sometimes things happened without my knowledge.

As more and more people got involved with *Kokoro Connect* in some capacity, some of those people did so after reading the source material, but most didn't. (Not to suggest that that's a bad thing, per se.) So while it was all based on my personal creation, some of it felt foreign to me, like there was a clear line between my work and theirs.

But looking back now, I can say this: Regardless of "whose" it is, all of it is inarguably my beloved *Kokoro Connect*. I love its world and characters more than anyone else. So it is with that love that I watch over *Kokoro Connect* as I send it out to all of you.

Hell, I'll shout it from the rooftops! Read the manga! Listen to the drama CDs! Watch the anime! Play the visual novel!

This is the wonderful world everyone has built with me.

With your help, *Kokoro Connect* has come to an end... but lately I'm fortunate to say I've been getting a handful of inquiries about my next work. Honestly, I don't know what my plans are. However, I want to be transparent with my readers — after all, I feel deeply indebted to those who have paid money for my books. For now, what I can say for sure is this: I don't want to write a new book just because people want me to, or because I need the money, or purely on a whim. I don't want to publish anything that, to me, does not have a clear purpose.

For that matter, I'm not dead-set on writing more, either; I barely consider myself an "author" to begin with. And

frankly, I don't *have* to be an author to accomplish the goal I have in mind. But at the same time, I imagine writing is the closest I'll get to it, and I can't deny that I *want* to keep writing. In short, writing is not my one true calling in life. It is simply a means to an end.

With that in mind, all I can say is — the next time you see a book by Anda Sadanatsu, you'll know that he truly wanted to write it.

To the readers of *Kokoro Connect*, I hope to see you again someday. And I *do* believe that day will come eventually.

...Okay, enough of me trying to sound cool. All I want is for all of you to have fun and enjoy my work. Plus, it's possible I might change my mind about a lot of this stuff (he says, avoiding all responsibility).

But just imagine: today might be the day that we meet. And meeting you might dramatically change my life, or my perspective. Who knows what might happen from there?

From the bottom of my heart, I'm grateful I got to share this fleeting moment with all of you.

Okay, now it really sounds like a final farewell — but actually, there's going to be one more short story compilation after this. An epilogue collection, if you will. This book is for the fans, so let me know what you want to see, and I'll try to work it in!

Until then, I'll see you around...

Oh, right! I was going to save all the detailed acknowledgments for the next volume, but it's possible some people will stop here, so just in case: I'd like to thank everyone who helped get this book published. Thank you so much!

—Anda Sadanatsu
March 2013

YAY!

**SERIES
COMPLETE**

Congratulations on
finishing your series!
It's been almost 3
years... but it feels
shorter than that
somehow...? I guess I
should say something...
Thanks for putting up
with me, boss!!

Hooray
for happy
endings!

Thanks for
everything!



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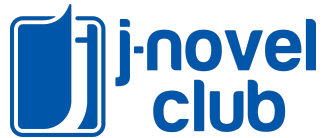
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Kokoro Connect Volume 10: Asu Random Part 2
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Translated by Molly Lee
Edited by Adam Fogle

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Illustrations by Shiromizakana

First published in Japan in 2013 by KADOKAWA
CORPORATION ENTERBRAIN

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Ebook edition 1.0 September 2020